

APOCALYPSE ISRAEL THE 96 HOUR WAR

IN 2029 THE STATE OF ISRAEL
WILL BE DESTROYED.

A TECHNOTHRILLER NOVEL BY
R.K. SYRUS

APOCALYPSE ISRAEL

R. K. SYRUS

CONTENTS

[Other Books Set in the New Praetorians Universe](#)

[Praise for the books of the New Praetorians series](#)

[Apocalypse Israel Timeline](#)

[Regional Map](#)

[Israel Map](#)

[Old City – Jerusalem](#)

[Temple Mount/Noble Sanctuary](#)

[Begin reading APOCALYPSE ISRAEL](#)

[The New Praetorians Series](#)

[Apocalypse Israel Wiki](#)

[Books in the New Praetorians Series](#)

[The New Praetorians Series Continuity](#)

[Copyright](#)

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Praise for the books of the *New Praetorians* series:

“...an intriguing world of futuristic technology, made more familiar by contemporary references.”

“Radiant descriptions also enhance the story.”

—Kirkus Reviews

ISRAEL TIMELINE

In 1967, Israel won The Six-Day War.

The young country defeated its many enemies and occupied much territory.

It was one of the greatest victories in military history.

Yet, some saw a darker side.

One veteran of that war was Amos Oz, later known as “Israel’s Tolstoy.”

Just after the war, Oz said:

“The Occupation will corrupt us.”

Israel’s wars and large-scale military operations:

- Israeli War of Independence (1947–1949)
- Anti-Fedayeen reprisal operations (1950s–1960s)
- Suez Crisis (1956)
- The Six-Day War (1967)
- The War of Attrition (1967–1970)
- The Yom Kippur War (1973)
- Palestinian insurgency in South Lebanon (1971–1982)
- First Lebanon War (1982)
- The Gulf War (1991)
- South Lebanon conflict (1985–2000)
- First Intifada (1987–1993)
- Second Intifada “Al-Aqsa” (2000–2005)
- Second Lebanon War (2006)
- The Gaza War (2008)
- The Second Gaza War (2023)
- The Jordan River Valley War (2026)

- The Sand Wraith Insurgency (2027)
- **The 96 Hour War (2029) Israel is destroyed, reconstruction commences**

REGIONAL MAP



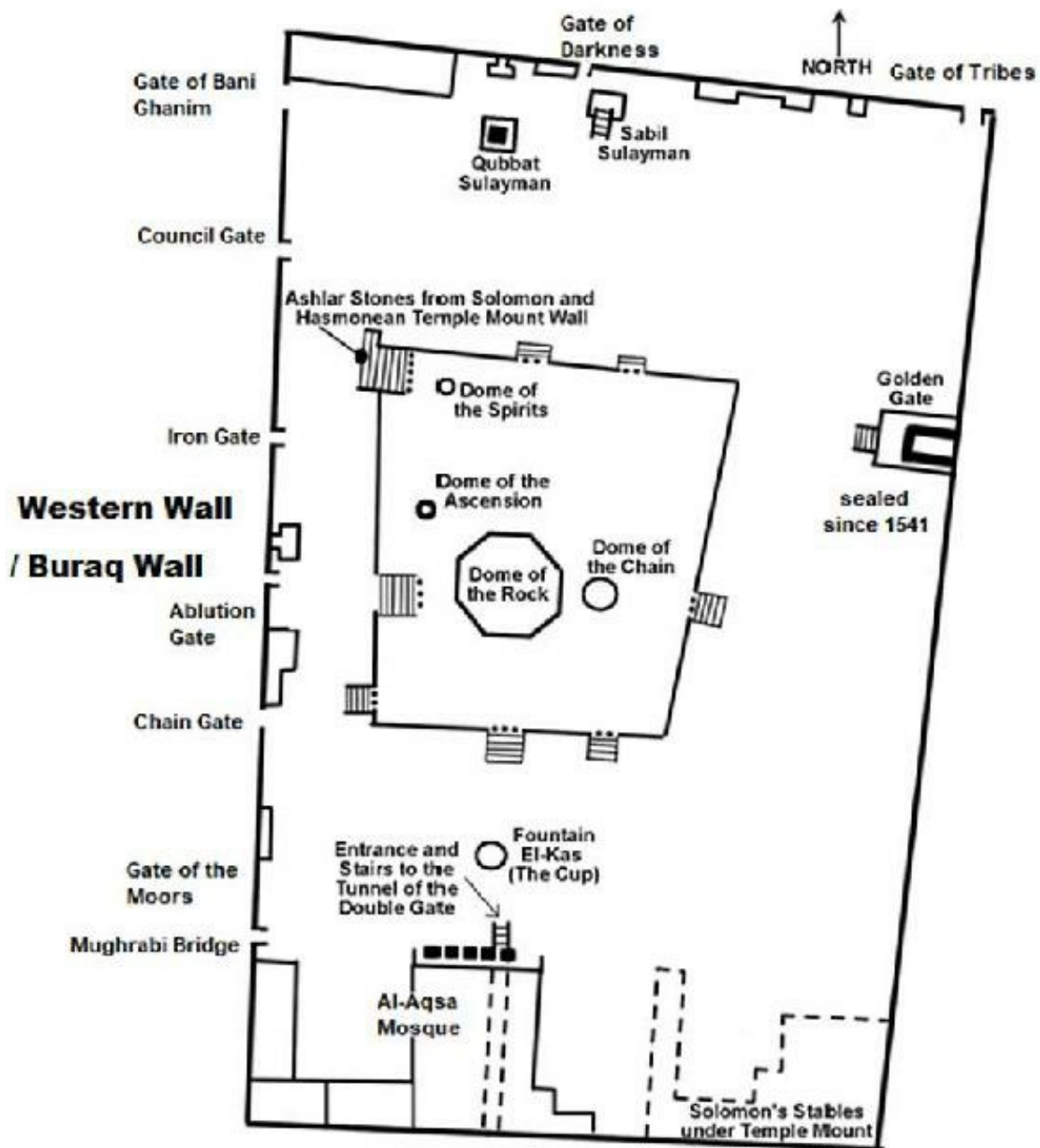
ISRAEL



OLD CITY - JERUSALEM



TEMPLE MOUNT / NOBLE SANCTUARY



1

THE KIRYA MINISTRY OF DEFENSE COMPLEX TEL AVIV

DAVID

David Baumann needed to kill Israel's minister of defense. He was determined to do it quietly so that his father's oldest friend could die a hero and not be revealed as the traitor he surely was. Defense Minister Yossi was sitting on the other side of his desk, and he looked like he really did not want to be shot. If they kept their cool, David had every reason to believe they could both have their way.

"People love to share secrets," Yossi said, shaking his head, which was mostly bald and mottled with lentil-colored sunspots. "It must be a compulsion of humanity. Inexcusable in both our professions. Mine, of preserving lives. Yours, of ending them."

The old bastard was so smug and superior, David thought, even now. Yossi must have seen this was a setup. His Shin Bet bodyguards had quietly disappeared; they were in the basement reading the *Jerusalem Post*.

Yossi continued. "You know what I tell the young lions of the Knesset parliament? Get a cat. Tell your secrets to it. That's why I have him, Khóshekh."

The defense minister's black Bombay cat jumped lithely from his lap to

the floor. Khóshekh looked up at David. In daylight, the cat's pupils were thin slits that looked like twin eyelashes caught in the molten amber of his huge irises. He slid out of sight under the desk through a narrow space that hadn't seemed to be there at all.

"Ach." Yossi waved his hand as though swatting at a distant gnat. "They told me someone from the Army's Intelligence Directorate was waiting in my office."

He smiled the thin smile David remembered from the occasional times the minister had dropped by their home.

"I didn't place you right away," Yossi said. "It's been a while since I visited Chief Rabbi Baumann. You are one of his children. You are David, the unpleasant son."

That was a bit harsh. Yossi might have just called him *datlashim*, a formerly religious Jew.

"I think, Minister, you might be prejudiced," David said, aiming the suppressed pistol steadily at the first button of the seated man's suit vest. "Given the circumstances."

The minister sighed. "If I recall, you were adopted."

Yossi had guts. The senior politician's first job in the IDF had been dismantling bombs. Some attached to living people, others attached to parts of formerly living people. The minister was a national hero.

The country's highest military honor, the Medal of Valor, sat in a small case. Next to it was a picture of Yossi as a younger, much slimmer man. Segen Mishne (Second Lieutenant) Yossi stood next to the men and women of his unit. Wind blew his hair—he had some then. Overhead, jet contrails cut white fishhook shapes into the azure sky. David's father, then an IDF rabbi, was next to Yossi, his great paw of a hand on the smaller man's shoulder.

David checked the office window. It was sealed. Through ten layers of laminated glass, David saw something odd. He gave no outward sign as he

tried to figure out what it was. Jiggling a few meters outside the window was some sort of heat zephyr. A bird flew into view. It came closer. Summersaulting in the air, the bird dove straight at the window. David tensed.

From the other side of the room, the black cat hissed.

The bird struck in full flight. A puff of feathers and a minor smear of blood and bird saliva were the only consequences. No sound penetrated the office. Of course. Those windows could withstand six kilos of explosive delivered by a terrorist drone.

During the bird's kamikaze mission, the heat zephyr hanging outside the building had vanished. Yossi hadn't noticed a thing. He was probably more interested in who had the balls to send an Army Directorate assassin to kill his own boss.

"Who, then? The prime minister?" Yossi demanded.

"Who else? She signed the order. So did the heads of the Mossad and Shin Bet. I'm told it was unanimous."

Yossi laughed grimly. "I must have missed that cabinet meeting."

Yossi was keeping his cool. But before their interview was over, David swore he'd see him sweat, the filthy traitor.

"What could Military Intelligence want from me?"

"Just one thing. My orders don't come with question marks behind them."

"No. You're more of an exclamation point," Yossi agreed. "When you were in high school, your father hoped you would not go in for the military. Said you were too sensitive for the IDF. 'If anything, he'd be a good Army rabbi,' he told me. Look at you now."

"Yes, look," David said.

Don't take your eyes off me and my pistol, he thought. *Above all, don't look at the microwave.* The appliance sat on a shelf opposite the minister's desk; inside was a slowly rotating hot cross bun. If Yossi moved from his chair, David would have to go with his backup plan: a hasty suicide.

Yossi stayed put. He studied David.

“When he’d had too much wine, your father told me something. The ZAKA Disaster recovery crew who found you didn’t know whose child you were. Jewish settlers in Judea and Samaria don’t always go to hospitals, neither do Arabs.”

David knew the story. Yossi was an ass for bringing it up. It was for the rabbi’s sake he was making sure this killing was done correctly, ethically.

“So I might be an ethnic Palestinian Arab. That has occurred to me. Because of roadblocks and checkpoints, more Palestinians are born on the way to hospitals than inside them.”

“Thirty years ago it was even more chaotic,” Yossi said. “Many children were not put in the national records until they had to apply for a travel permit.”

“So?” David asked.

“One of the Arabs you’ve executed, in what I understand is a dramatic and bloodstained career, may have been your cousin or brother or sister.”

“No.”

“No? Mizrahi Jews and Arab Muslims have the same DNA. Your adoptive father told me the search for your birth parents never yielded a match to anyone. You couldn’t know—”

“I’ve never killed an Arab,” David said. “I’ve never slain a Muslim or a Jew or a Gentile, or an African or an Asian. I’ve only ever stopped security-risk subjects from pulling bricks out of our wall.”

The minister glanced at David’s weapon. It was a modified FN 5.7mm pistol. He had polished the top slide so the minister wouldn’t think a jam or misfire was even a remote possibility. The rounds it fired would penetrate the two layers of custom-tailored IIIA body armor woven into Yossi’s business suit.

“David, you know walls built for noble purposes cannot use blood as mortar.”

Was he pleading for his life? The twat.

“No blood will be shed here today,” David said. Yossi’s hands moved to the armrests, as though he were about to stand. “As long as you stay still. Very still.”

A soft but insistent small black figure edged against David’s leg. As soon as that happened, Yossi looked at a letter opener on his desk. There was nothing about a cat in the mission brief David had been given. Missed details make a mess. He’d have to have words with Army Intel. If they can’t spy on their own people thoroughly, what can they do?

“I thought they banned pets in offices,” David said, making conversation. “Ever since the Iranians put bugs in that schnauzer’s flea collar.”

“We never let Galina forget that one.” Yossi smiled. “That was years back, when you were a bodel, a gofer for Mossad. You brought us lunch most afternoons from that little bakery you worked at after school. What was it called?”

“The Holy Bagel,” David said with genuine nostalgia. “Their shop in Jerusalem was right by St. Peter’s. They did huge business during Christian pilgrimages.”

“Maybe you should have stayed a baker.”

“Maybe.”

Yossi pulled at his collar. “It’s a bit hot. I want to take off my jacket.”

“Leave it on,” David said politely and firmly. “A little while.”

Yossi looked more frustrated than fearful. “Is this a targeted execution? Jews don’t do that to Jews.”

Was Yossi baiting him so he could grab a weapon? There was the question about his own origins. Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews generally had darker complexions. Sometimes they felt slighted by lighter-skinned European Jews.

“You’re right. Even our version of Lee Harvey Oswald, the assassin who killed Prime Minister Yitzak Rabin was not executed. The killer lived a relatively comfortable life in prison; he even got married and had a family,”

David said with disgust. “On the other hand, in the 1930s, our Jewish underground armies were fighting the British. We often liquidated our own Jewish traitors and informers.”

“That was long ago,” Yossi said, relaxing to a disturbing degree. “You’re not going to shoot me. Not in my own office. Even the prime minister wouldn’t think she could get away with that, no matter what control she has over Shin Bet internal security.”

“Hold still. It won’t be long.”

Yossi went pale. A smart man, he knew something was going on. He just didn’t know what. By now, he might be feeling heartburn.

“David, I’ve... I’ve known your father, how many years?” Sweat started to gather on Yossi’s fading brow and the rim of his collar. Behind them, the samovar made gurgling noises. The cat had disappeared. The splotch the suicidal bird had made on the window glass had dried.

“Many, I suppose.”

“David! Did they even tell you what I’m accused of? Did you even ask?” Yossi drew a deeper breath, like he could not get enough air. “I have to tell you... Israel exists because of three great pillars. One... military strength. We’ve lost battles, never a war. Two, friends and allies among the community of nations. Three, the belief of Jews everywhere that Israel should... *must* exist.

“When you hear wha... what I have to tell you, you will see these pillars, all three of them, are under in... er, insidious assault. Re-requiring drastic action on the part of all true Israelis.”

David was sick of this crap. Rabid right-wing Jewish fanatics used security to justify anything and everything. The official demographer belonging to Israel’s now-banned fascist Kach party once said the solution to the Palestinian birthrate was “kill, kill, kill.” When asked to clarify that, he said, “Before they crawl over a wall, we must shoot them in the head.”

David had long ago concluded the Arab terrorist in his gunsight was less

sinister than the Jewish crazy behind his back. Here he was face-to-face with the worst one, a mole who had embedded himself deep in the government.

“Do...” Yossi’s breath caught short in his chest. He swallowed hard. “You mind if I turn up the air?”

“I’ll do that in a moment.”

David was pissed. Just once he’d like a subject to “fess up” as an American would say.

Yes, I put the bomb in the drainpipe.

Yes! I cut the throats of the refugees and threw them overboard to save fuel costs.

The last thing he needed was to listen to Minister Yossi’s *zevel* rant straight from the playbook of the ultranationalists like the ones who had shot Rabin in the back.

David could give a crap about politics. But Rabin was born in Jerusalem. He had been a soldier in the Haganah militia before the state of Israel existed. He’d served as head of the IDF during the Six-Day War, one of the greatest military victories in history. He was a man. After the assassination, reactionaries in the Israeli press branded Yitzak Rabin a *rodef*: a homicidal maniac who, in traditional Jewish law, may be legally killed by those he is threatening.

What horseshit, David thought.

Rabin’s assassin turned out to be a Jewish student, a punk who shot the prime minister with a gun he could barely aim. The killer admitted being recruited by the Shin Bet. Before trial, the assassin said, “If I were to tell the whole truth, the entire system would collapse. I know enough to destroy this country.” His name was Yigal Amir. He was a worm.

So was Defense Minister Yossi. He was like the symptom of a disease in Israeli society that had to be burned out before the scars could heal over. Yossi was the leader of the Daggers of Ehud, the apocalyptic Jewish ultra-zealots.

“You don’t under...” Yossi could barely speak.

“I’m not here to adjudicate.”

“Then you don’t”—he coughed—“don’t care for the truth!”

“I went to Gaza,” David said with bile that surprised him. “I saw the excavations myself. I had to be sure. You signed the orders. There’s audio, video, and no doubt.”

David still had orange-colored grit of Gaza Strip sand under his fingernails.

“I saw the liquefying corpses, Yossi,” David said coldly. “The men, women, and children your people executed in Gaza and were in the process of disposing of. The tunneling equipment, chemicals for dissolving bodies, and a sewer to drain the sludge into the Mediterranean. We interrupted you in the middle of a mass liquidation of moderate Palestinian Arabs.”

Yossi started shaking.

“Y-you saw only what Miri Drach wanted you to see.”

David was too full of righteous indignation to hear anything.

“Your hit list had thousands of names on it. *You* are the leader of the Daggers of Ehud, the Israeli doomsday cult we’ve been tracking for years.”

Yossi made a brief gurgling noise. “You don’t under—”

“I do understand. And now, so do you.”

Yossi’s heartburn must be pretty severe, and spreading. David lowered his gun.

“Two years ago, doctors fed a tube up your femoral artery into your heart. To clear a blockage, they implanted a stent. Old style. Reliable. Unfortunately, under the right conditions, flammable.”

Yossi toppled off his chair onto an expensive Senneh knot rug. He rolled in agony, clutching at his chest.

“Y-you have to—” Yossi gasped.

It was right. It was justified. Yossi needed to die so that millions of Israelis—Jews, Arabs, Druze, and Christians—could live in security. It was an ugly

thing he was doing to his father's old friend.

David checked the time. He had only a few more minutes of guaranteed security blackout. He picked up the heat beam transmitter from under the microwave oven. It had sent a narrow beam of intense radio waves at Yossi's chest. Just like an MRI scan will cause a hip implant to go burning hot, these rays had zeroed in on the stent in Yossi's heart and literally set it on fire.

"The prime minister said it was best for the state and her fragile political coalition in the Knesset if there was no trial, no shame upon your family," David said to the prone man. "You'll be remembered as the teenager who hacked the national computer to change his age so he could go and fight in the Lebanon War, the defense minister who worked for years to reduce the role of the Army in policing the Palestinian territories. No one will know all along you were an anarchic zealot who would have brought us to the brink of catastrophe."

Yossi had pried his convulsing hand off his chest.

"Urgh... you have to stop..."

He rolled onto his back. His eyes bugged out toward the ceiling.

"... Khóshekh."

Yossi lay still.

David forced himself to look at the man he'd executed. He had been a war hero. His father's friend. He remembered Yossi and the rabbi sitting in the garden, talking, drinking icy lemonade. Did Yossi give him his first taste of the slushy drink? It didn't matter now.

David held a fat gunmetal-gray handset over the body. "Miss Aleph?"

Invisible sensors lanced out. A female voice pronounced the verdict.

"Respiration: zero

Blood pressure: negligible

Heart rate: zero

Brain activity: zero—wait. Dave, bring me closer."

David did as the AI instructed.

"Brain activity: zero microvolts. There must have been a post-mortem spike."

The handheld coroner finished her examination.

“Good work, Dave. He’s as dead as a herring.”

David wanted to yell at the handset. What he had done was just, even merciful, but it was not “good work.”

“Have some respect.”

“You’re the one who killed him. How respectful was that?”

The black cat padded over and sniffed Yossi’s body. Suddenly he flattened his ears, hissed, and dodged sideways to the other side of the office.

The Daggers of Ehud had taken up where the terrorist Kach Movement left off. Those fanatics had massacred dozens of Muslims in the Cave of the Patriarchs. They’d made detailed plans to blow up Islamic holy sites, including Jerusalem’s Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa Mosque, hopefully while packed with worshippers. Members of their political wing had been elected to the Knesset. They called for Arabs to be “concentrated” and “eradicated.” Their ultimate goal was the building of a third temple on the Temple Mount of Jerusalem and igniting a global war of ethnic cleansing on a biblical scale.

The Daggers of Ehud were Israel’s deep state. The Daggers saw themselves as the only true Zionists. To David, they were mad dogs to be put down. He was here on direct orders from Prime Minister Drach and the security cabinet to decapitate the Daggers’ leadership.

Drach herself had told him, “Yossi is fanatically opposed to my Permanent Peace Plan. The Arabs he liquidated in Gaza were all moderates. And you think he will stop there?” She had shaken her head with regret and resolve. “The Daggers have a domestic assassination list. My name, like Rabin’s in 1995, is at the top. Next down is that of the cabinet Minister for Religious Affairs, your father, Rabbi Baumann.”

Yossi had to die.

The black cat rubbed against his leg. What were Yossi’s last words? Something about the cat. The Bombay breed’s fur was so black he was nearly blue tinged. Could the old bastard have bugged his own cat? David examined the animal’s collar pendant.

Watching, anticipating, the machine mind in his handset, Miss Aleph, assured him.

“There’s no electric current in the pendant.”

He moved to the door.

“Forgetting something?”

“Huh?”

“Khóshekh,” Miss Aleph chided. “Your cover story, which I meticulously arranged, is that you stumbled in just as the minister was collapsing. Knowing he has only distant foreign relatives, you took pity on his lonely pet.”

“I did?”

“Psychological studies show people are eighty-five percent more likely to believe stories in which the main character saves a helpless animal. I know you. If you leave the cat and something happens to him, you’ll never forgive yourself.”

David picked up Khóshekh. He seemed like an independent fellow who wouldn’t require much maintenance. He’d be a good listener, better than the annoying AI.

“You know, Khóshekh,” David said, looking long and hard at the dead body on the floor, “the minute we start killing people for their race or what they think, as opposed to what they actually do, all the walls in the world won’t be able to save Israel.”

He shut the door quietly. As arranged, the corridor was empty, and all monitoring equipment was updating its software.

And me? I’m a killer confiding in a cat. I need a vacation.

Carrying Khóshekh, David left the headquarters of the IDF.

...

The black Bombay cat decided to relax in the firm but not unpleasant grasp of the male human.

Khóshekh’s first concern was his fur. He was clean. He did not want to be covered in disgusting mint or citrus smell, which people often wore.

He guessed this was his new human. The feline didn’t place much reliance on the expressions on people’s faces. Smell and body language told fewer lies. The new man smelled clean. He smelled reliable.

Khóshekh glanced back to the vertical human climbing tube. They had just gotten out of one. Another was coming down. The front of the climbing box was covered with what he recognized as “hard-see-through.” The inside was dark, but not too dark for Khóshekh’s widening pupils to see inside.

The human climbing tube did not stop. As it passed, he saw his old human standing there, looking right at him. That was odd. When he had been lying on the floor, his former human had definitely smelled dead. Now the same older man was standing upright by himself and was acting strangely.

He was only visible for a few seconds, but Khóshekh noticed the angle of his old human’s body and the way he jittered, trying to remain upright. He did not look well; in fact, he still looked dead but was walking. A shimmering ball surrounded the man’s bald head. It looked like heat, but Khóshekh sensed the same icy tendrils coming from there, which had spooked him before when the bird had hit the hard-see-through in the upstairs room. Even at a distance it made the fur on the back of his neck stand up.

Khóshekh flicked his head forward, squinting at the bright sunlight. It was just as well this new man was taking him away. He ruffled his neck, settling down the fur around his necklace, and yawned. Khóshekh stayed still and kept his secrets.

2

CITIZEN JUGGERNAUT NEWSROOM LONDON

ELLIE

As Ellie Sato headed for her editor's office she glanced into the International Affairs section of the newsroom. She wished she hadn't. Yet another horrid, horrid video from the Middle East was playing on the enormous monitor set into the wall.

"A young Palestinian nurse has been shot dead on the Gaza border, in the latest killing of protesters, media, and medical staff by Israeli forces," the BBC announcer said.

One of the men sitting around the astonishingly messy desk commented, "They're all bloody terrorists, ain't they?"

"She doesn't look like a terrorist," Ellie said, pausing to snag a Curly Wurly candy out of their snack bowl.

"I mean," Ed Flappe tried to explain, "deep down underneath, they're all terrorists."

"Nazeema al-Akel was a volunteer working with Worldwide Help and the Red Crescent Society. She was helping treat protesters injured by Israeli live fire when she was also struck."

"Just to clarify, Ed," Ellie said, bending the chocolate-coated caramel between her teeth, "it's your position that Arabs, or possibly all members of

the Muslim faith, have jihadi tendencies, which are invariably revealed when they are naked?”

“Oh!” Ed Flappe, whose nickname was Fat Ed, wheezed. “That’s not what I mean at all. Don’t be so snooty intellectual.”

“Balliol college girls just can’t help it.”

Ed Flappe’s conjoined workplace twin—they never seemed more than two meters apart during the day—was John Favre.

John supported his friend by trying to ridicule her. “Yes, Ellie ‘Umbrellas are the New Handbags’ Sato.”

They would never let her forget that article she wrote after one too many complimentary drinks at Harrods’ Champagne Bar.

Undaunted, she shot back, “I heard the news director called you two ‘Flappe and Faff.’ It was during the latest meeting on redundancy staff cuts.”

The big video screen showed a montage of pictures. A passport photo showed a young woman with brilliantly huge dark Arab eyes. The same picture was also on poster placards. These were held by rather scary-looking young men beating themselves over the forehead until blood ran down their faces.

“Oh my!” Ellie said.

The only Muslims Ellie personally knew were in the fashion industry. They were all highly educated, working in high couture, and uniformly gay. The media never showed those people.

When they played the actual shooting, Ellie froze between wanting to look away and awful curiosity. Why had Nazeema been shot by the Israeli soldiers? Did her medical equipment look like a bomb? Was she in front of an Arab militant firing a weapon at the border fence? Ellie couldn’t see how the girl was a threat. The fence and the security berms were hundreds of meters away.

The slow motion clicked frame by frame. The staccato replay of someone being killed halfway around the world only deepened the mystery. Nazeema

was crouching down, over an even younger youth writhing in pain from what looked like a leg wound. She rose, perhaps to call for a stretcher. Then her torso twisted suddenly to one side. She fell. A wet red stain soaked through her white uniform and spread. The blotch blossomed, soaking through and obscuring the Red Crescent and the Worldwide Help International medic symbols.

“Days of outrage have followed across the Arab world and in many European capitals. Ms. al-Akel was twenty, a Jordanian national of Palestinian descent who had only recently received an Israeli visa to enter Gaza on humanitarian relief grounds.”

“Those chappies always seem outraged at something, don’t they?” Fat Ed said. He grabbed the candy bar from Ellie. “Oy, this comes straight out of our coffee budget. You anorexics in the Fashion and Lifestyle department got your own treats: celery sticks and laxatives.”

Fat Ed slammed his fat butt down onto his extra sturdy desk chair and chomped.

“Fine. I wasn’t hungry anyway,” Ellie said.

“Don’t tell me that’s where you’re off to.” Ed jabbed the chocolate and caramel at the screen. “Flippin’ dangerous there in the Middle East, it is.”

“I’m off to Kurdistan. Totally different place,” Ellie said, now not so sure. “It’s been carved out of North Iraq. Lovely country, er, from the pictures. Besides, the Americans are guaranteeing the peace as the Kurds declare independence.”

John Favre, who could actually find the Middle East on a map, said, “Southern Iraq, the part that is *not* going to be Kurdistan, is where you don’t want to be. They kicked all US forces out. Southern Iraq is formally allied with their fellow Shi’a Muslims in Iran. The Americans switched their support to the fledgling homeland for the Kurds. This sent the Turks and their Sunni Iraqi allies spinnin’ mental.”

Ellie’s head starting spinning, and not from an agreeable Curly sugar blast.

Shi'a, Sunni, Iran, Turks? Her major at Oxford had been fine art and fashion.

"Hang on." Ellie fiddled with her handbag. Her least-expensive fountain pen and a notepad were always in an outer pouch. "I'd better take notes on this. How do you spell Shi'a?"

"...when asked about the shooting of hundreds of unarmed Palestinian protesters and the injuries to thousands over the past weeks, Israel's Prime Minister Drach declined comment.

"Her spokesperson released a written statement saying:

'The state of Israel condemns senseless violence and the use of human shields by those dedicated to its destruction. The IDF will continue to use all force necessary to defend the integrity of our borders.

"Everyone approaching the fences must be aware of the danger. Leaflets were distributed that same day, increasing the no-go zone to three hundred meters. The terrorists put Ms. al-Akel in harm's way, and they are solely responsible for the consequences.'"

Despite his attempt to hide his real ambitions with petty gluttony, Ellie thought John Favre looked quite jealous. The Kurdistan agenda she'd been given by the media liaison from the Foreign Office looked sedate and civilized. More of a baby shower for the birth of a new nation. Ellie wondered if there was a Lifestyles tie-in: What to Wear When Declaring Independence.

"John, you sure you can't go?" Ellie asked. "You know so much more about the area. It was originally your story."

Ellie had been on the Lifestyles desk for nearly four years. Before that, after college, she'd gotten a job at a failing local paper in Northumberland. They paid so little and so infrequently that she'd have been on the dole if it hadn't been for shifts at her mum and dad's pub and restaurant.

This Kurdistan gig would be her first foray into reporting real news, but maybe she was being too ambitious trying to cover Kurdish independence by herself.

John and Ed shook their heads in unison. “You have to enter Kurdistan through Ankara. Two ruddy marijuana cautions from when I was seventeen screwed my visa to Turkey right proper,” John said. “They came back with: ‘High risk repeat narcotics offender.’ Like I’m planning to be a drug mule.”

Ed looked at the assignment board and said, “We’ll just have to make do with local news: ‘Croydon Cat Killer Strikes Again.’”

“Just as well, John,” Ellie said. “I’ve seen the old film *Midnight Express*. I don’t think you’d do so well in a Turkish prison.”

Ellie dodged into the corridor just ahead of a balled-up candy wrapper.

“Ellie!” Smitty, the big editor, yelled out of his cavern. The *Citizen Juggernaut* used to have more detailed job titles, but there had been so many layoffs and reorganizations that it was getting to be a bit much to print up new business cards each time. “Get in here. We have to straighten something out.”

“About the assignment?” Ellie asked, inching around a ceiling-high stack of enormous hardbound books and newsprint.

Smitty looked aggrieved and somewhat embarrassed. “Not really. It’s about, uh, you know.”

“Has that little thing sprung up again?” Ellie said, flexing her wrists. “Well, we’ll have it down in no time. Just relax and lean against the desk.”

Moments later, Smitty’s orgiastic agonized moans echoed out his wide-open office door and down the corridor.

“Oooh oh oh... Ahhh!”

During one of their sessions a year ago, Ellie had made the mistake of closing Smitty’s door. A contract cleaner had called Scotland Yard’s workplace exploitation and harassment section. It took a good hour for them to explain Smitty was not pressuring her into being a part-time sex worker.

“How’s that?” Ellie said, letting go of the man’s thick wrists.

Smitty straightened up, feeling the bones of his lower back, which she had just prodded back into their proper places.

“You’re a miracle worker, Ellie. It must be true what they say about Eurasian women’s hands.”

“Careful, I’ve still got that detective inspector’s card. She was ever so convinced you were the pervy leader of a sex-trade grooming gang.”

Smitty sat down carefully in a chair, which had so many adjustable pieces, headrest extensions, and armrest contraptions that it looked like a prop from the wax museum’s torture chamber.

Across the street, they were building another enormous skyscraper. Unlike the Shard, which looked like, well, a shard, and 20 Fenchurch, which looked like a microwave oven that had melted itself, this new addition would be shaped exactly like the Gherkin they were in, except larger.

“What are they calling the new tower?” she asked.

“Gherkin Two.”

“Can’t they be more original?”

“Well, it’s the only thing it resembles, innit? Can’t rightly call it the Butt Plug Building.”

“Right,” Ellie said thoughtfully, looking across at the Tulip Tower. After some starts and fits getting that project going, the structure’s long shaft and bulbous tip loomed proudly over the city, though the interior and the knobbly gyrating observation roundabout on the top would take a year or two yet to complete. “Why do all the new London office buildings look like giant sex toys?”

Smitty shrugged, resigned to never being able to fathom the mysteries of modern architecture. “When are you leaving for Kurdistan?”

“First I have to go to Turkey. The US embassy in Ankara is where all the journalists are getting entry stamps to the new country.”

“You better go home, then.”

“Relax, you’ll make your back seize again. A Foreign Office valet came by my place and picked up my bags.” Ellie deftly plunged her miraculous Eurasian hand into a big crystal bowl of Maltesers. She grabbed as many of

the milk chocolate spheres with their crunchy yet lightly malted milk centers as her dextrous fingers could hold. “I’m on the official flight to Ankara with our Turkish consul.”

“Careful, Ellie. The government doesn’t spend a nickel unless they think they can get a dollar’s worth of positive publicity.”

“Don’t worry. If British multinationals are exploiting the carpet weavers of Kurdistan, I’ll ferret out the truth, and people will read about it first in the *Juggernaut*.”

“People don’t read anymore.” Smitty forlornly adjusted one of his orthopaedic chair armrests to be nearly level with his shoulder. “Don’t become a dried-up old haggis like me.”

“I promise to use moisturizer.”

“I’m serious. The future is with integrated media. McLuhan said ‘the medium is the message.’”

Smitty tried to get up, grimaced, gave up, then gestured to a big color wheel on the wall.

“Look at the color chart, Ellie. All the studies have shown the ‘shade’ of news is more important to the consumer than whether the facts are true or not. Today’s shade is persimmon. That means lots of dog and cat stories. Communications-pharmaceutical conglomerates are making up transient fads and then selling them back to us.”

“The fashion industry’s been doing that since the Greeks.”

“Using this ‘news shade’ model, infotainment will soon be prescribed by doctors along with complimentary psychoactive drugs.” Thinking of the blitzkrieg of change in their industry sent a fresh spasm of pain through Smitty’s back muscles. “Do you realize there’s a mad German fellow wanting to make cell phones that you can inject into your body?”

“Dr. Licht, right. He sent the Lifestyles department a demo model of a holographic satellite phone the size of a credit card.” Ellie had grabbed the device before someone sold it online.

“Induced synesthesia as a lifestyle choice. It’s the future of media! You’re young. You have to catch this wave.”

When Smitty got a wind in his sails, he was as convincing as those door knockers who kept telling Ellie she was going to Hell if she didn’t accept their pamphlets.

“So, does that mean future media will not make us feel inadequate, dull, poor, and generally bonkers?”

“No, it will still do all that. But it will be easier to monetize!” Smitty said. “If you get enough subscribers to your personal media stream, you can nab a long-term contract and report from anywhere: Paris, Sydney, wherever you like.”

“That’s why I’m expanding my horizons all the way to Kurdistan.”

Trying to hang on to a paycheck during cataclysmic downsizing in the media business was one good reason to cover the Kurdistan story. Another was all of her Oxford friends who, when they learned she was doing fashion reporting, would say “That’s nice” in a condescendingly sympathetic tone and give her the brush-off. As though being unambitious was catching.

She had a law degree from Oxford, and the student debt to prove it. She had an advanced degree from Kyoto University, and everyone she met on the fashion reporting circuit was an unpaid intern. It was now or never to break out. Either that or go back to Northumberland and pull pints at her parents’ pub until she qualified for free NHS dentures. Destiny was calling; it was her moment to shine.

Also that twit John Favre couldn’t go, and the Foreign Office is flying me on a government plane.

If only there was a way to lock down an exclusive on Kurdistan, Ellie mused. A scoop like that could get her a Paris posting. She imagined herself in the very near future covering couture stories and international stuff wherever there was a five-star hotel. Fat chance, though. How could a reporter, especially one from a print newspaper that, for tax and government

grant reasons, didn't even have a website, get a whole new country as an exclusive?

The BBC was also on in Smitty's office. They summed up the news from the Middle East.

"...the special UN envoy described Israel's Occupied Territories as the 'world's largest open-air penitentiaries holding life-term inmates who are born, live, and die behind twenty-five-foot-high concrete walls.' He said another Gaza war could spark a regional conflict.

"The Israeli Ministry of Defense, still reeling from the unexpected heart attack death of Minister Yossi, would only say the interim minister, Boaz Baumann, son of that country's chief rabbi, would study the issue and release a statement in due course."

"Jeremy," a female announcer said, "the tragic shooting death of this young paramedic is another sad chapter added to the saga of a troubled region. Where will it end?"

"Christy, one thing is certain: Whatever happens, if it is news of international import, BBC World Service will be there!"

This time, she thought, so will Ellie Sato.

3

KIRYA TOWER TEL AVIV

DAVID

“Are you able to attend shiva at Yossi’s house?” Rabbi Baumann asked.

“He of blessed memory,” said the other rabbi, who could have been his twin.

“He of blessed memory,” David’s father repeated.

David could tell his father was bothered by more than the death of a long-time friend and ally. Whatever it was, the truth David had taken great pains to conceal would have devastated Israel’s senior rabbinic leader. Yossi had been carrying out unspeakable crimes that led to the prime minister and cabinet authorizing his targeted assassination, authorizing David to carry it out.

“I don’t think I can,” David said. “There’s always surveillance by someone.” This was true; the intelligence services of Iran, Russia, and even China monitored those sorts of gatherings.

Behind the large dark-clad figure of David’s father was another similarly dressed man. Rabbi Gabriel Toledano was the other chief rabbi of Israel. Rabbi Baumann represented the Ashkenazi tradition, while Rabbi Toledano was the leader of the Sephardic Jewish tradition. The Spanish-sounding name was no accident—his ancestors’ branch of Judaism had been established during the early Middle Ages in what was now Spain and Portugal. Some

Sephardic Jews even spoke a form of Judaeo-Spanish called Ladino.

“Your son is wise and cautious,” Toledano said, looking around at the bare walls of the blandly decorated government building. “I feel winds of discord. We should stick to our books.”

“Gabby,” a scratchy, brittle voice croaked from behind the two men. “You’ve been saying that since you had to stand on your toes to pick my pockets.”

She was probably the only person who could call a chief rabbi of Israel “Gabby.” This was understandable since she was older than the country.

A tiny figure used sharp elbows to prod the two large men out of her way. She was as gnarly and tough as the Sisters Olive trees, said to have been planted by Noah himself. If the State of Israel had a flinty center, it was Mrs. Stein, MK. “Alt” Stein had been in her late twenties and listening on the radio when David Ben-Gurion declared Eretz-Israel in May of 1948. That put her well into her second century. She had been a backbench member of the Knesset for five decades. Most politicians considered her the nation’s good luck charm.

“Mrs. Stein,” David’s father said jovially, “I thought we’d lost you down in the parking garage.”

“That’ll be the day. You two lumps will have to waddle faster than that,” she said, giving them both a poke in the sides for good measure. “Too many latkes, not enough laps in the swimming pool.”

Her sharp eyes, nearly hidden among her wrinkles, looked piercingly at David. He felt more uncomfortable under her gaze than when he had just been lying by omission to his father. The woman had a witch’s gaze that seemed to see the coldblooded killer behind his soldier’s façade.

“You should follow your son’s example. Now there’s a lean specimen of Jewish manhood if I ever saw one,” she said, quite openly checking out his waist and butt.

The rabbis’ Shin Bet bodyguards looked uncomfortable. Either they didn’t

like hanging around in the open or they didn't know how to treat Mrs. Stein.

"Your brother is downstairs discussing important things with the prime minister," his father said. "As a minor cabinet member, I'm not invited. What do you think is going on?"

David pretended to look like he was thinking. He'd gotten better at that since he got married. Well, father, for one thing, one of your oldest friends Yossi was the leader of Daggers of Ehud, who were determined to start an apocalyptic race war.

"I don't know much more than you'd read in the *Post*," David said. "There are food riots in Iraq, which have been getting worse since the Americans pulled out and the militias took over. Mostly around Ramadi. The Sunni accuse the Shi'a of starving them in preparation for an Iranian invasion. The only thing the Iraqis agree on is, after decades, they have finally decided they want nothing more to do with Americans. The Europeans and Worldwide Help are trucking in a massive relief convoy through Turkey."

There were a few other regional updates.

"Hezbollah tried using a volocopter as a flying car bomb in the north. It crashed.

"In a few days, Kurdistan's being formally recognized by the UN. The Turks are keeping oddly quiet about it."

"Headlines," the rabbi scoffed. "I can read them in the *Post*."

"As Homer Simpson says in Yiddish: d'oy vey!"

"Watch it," his father warned good-naturedly. "I can still cuff you no matter how much of a strapping example of Israeli manhood you are."

"Take me out of here," Mrs. Stein ordered Baumann and Toledano. She sniffed the air and wrinkled her nose, which made her look even more like a shar pei. "The food court smells like a leather factory. Who knows what's in those hot plates."

His father shrugged. David walked them to the desk to sign out. While they were scanning his briefcase, Rabbi Toledano thought of something.

“Yossi’s cat,” he said. “They said you have him.”

“I do. I arrived just after the medical team got to Yossi’s office. His secretary is allergic, so we took him.”

“All jet-black fur and lamplike yellow eyes,” Toledano said as he pushed his fat wristwatch through the security scanner.

“Yossi’s assistant told me his name is Kho-sek. It sounds Indo-Iranian,” David said.

“Oh, how you embarrass me,” his father said.

Toledano smiled at David’s blank expression. “It’s from the second cup of Passover Seder. The cup reminds us of plagues visited on Egypt after the pharaoh refused Moses’s demand that he free the enslaved Jews.”

David felt familiar heat of embarrassment on his cheeks, as though he had failed a test. Of course. But Yossi had said his cat’s name in a strange way, almost like he was afraid of it. Also David and his wife spoke mostly English and Arabic at home. Still, he was the rabbi’s son and, however slightly, had shamed himself in public.

“Khóshekh. I remember,” Mrs. Stein chimed in. “It was part of my third... No, make that my fourth husband’s Seder.

“The man was positively obsessed with the teachings of Rabbi Eleazar of Worms.” Her voice echoed keenly in the stone of the entry arch of the Kiryat building. “With a finger, we removed a drop of wine from our cups and sprinkled it on our plates as each plague was mentioned... blood, frogs, lice, wild beasts, blight, boils, hail, locusts... and khóshekh: darkness. Followed by the last, Makkat B’khorot: Slaying of the First Born.”

Mrs. Stein and the two rabbis exited the sliding doors into the Tel Aviv sunshine. David descended into the bunkers beneath the complex. He was met at the security entrance by the head of state.

“David, before we go in.” Prime Minister Miri Drach put a hand gently on his shoulder. “I want you to know, it was the right thing you did.”

Ms. Drach was the second female prime minister of Israel after Golda

Meir. Drach had been a fighter pilot in the Air Force and taught law at Hebrew University before entering politics. As far as David knew, Yossi's execution was the first targeted killing of an Israeli citizen she had sanctioned.

"Yossi could have stood trial," David said. "A secret military tribunal?"

They were inside a small soundproof antechamber leading to the large situation room in the sub-basement of the Kirya Tower. His voice betrayed ambivalence. The life-long politician noticed it right away.

"You know as well as I do that never would have worked. There are no secrets in politics. The coalition we spent years building around the Permanent Peace Plan would collapse. A scandal like Yossi's betrayal could harm Israel for a decade." Miri Drach shook her head. "You saw what he and the Daggers were doing. He used gas canisters. Carbon dioxide, which is heavier than air, for the lower floors, and nitrogen to inflict inert gas asphyxiation on anyone in the upper floors of the target houses in Gaza. The Arabs would demand revenge, innocent Israelis would die."

Drach was sixty-three, of average to slight build, and her graying hair was pulled into a tight bun, which her publicists must have hated. Her face looked weary but resolute.

She continued. "Gaza is such a mess. Hamas was accusing their rivals Fatah of the killings. Whole families, men, women, infants, were being disappeared. We did the right thing."

Since being carved out of the British Mandate in 1948, Gaza had never had respite. It was a besieged hellhole from which more than two million people longed to escape. Yossi had added to the people's misery, and for that David had slain him.

"Gas, David. He was using gas. He would have done the same against the Daggers' enemies in Israel itself."

"What about Yossi's accomplices?"

Miri Drach nodded firmly.

“With the head sliced off, Shin Bet and Mossad will clean up the rest of the wriggling snakes.”

David looked through the glass into the big room. Boaz, his brother, was there.

“Who knows about Yossi?”

“Myself, you, Eli Weissach, and the Mossad director. No one else,” the politician assured him. “Yossi’s four decades of impeccable service to the state will not be wiped out by whatever form of zealous lunacy afflicted him in the end.”

“My brother looks anxious,” David said.

“Boaz should,” Drach said. “I’ve just made him interim minister of defense.”

They went in through the blast-resistant door. Boaz gave David a thin smile.

“Do I have to call you ‘Excellency’ now?” David said wryly.

They shook hands. Boaz’s hairline was receding. His close-set eyes always impressed him as bookish, but in an accounting sort of way, not a rabbinical way like their father.

“The rabbi was upstairs.”

“I know,” Boaz said curtly. “I’ve had a lot to do. Yossi’s files were a mess.”

“I did my part,” David said.

Boaz looked at him.

“I’m taking care of his cat.”

David looked around. On the other side of his brother stood Eli Weissach. He was the thirty-five-year-old head of the Shin Bet and a rough-looking customer. He always looked like he was about to pull his sidearm and plug someone.

David had been in the chief of staff’s control room at the IDF several times, but this place was the next generation center for AI-integrated warfare.

The handset in his pocket suddenly piped up. Miss Aleph's voice quavered:

"Dave, my mind is going. I can feel it."

Boaz gritted his teeth, like he was being upstaged.

The prime minister smiled. "Who's that you've got there?"

"It's Miss Aleph, my personal mechBrain."

The large IDF father of all Israel's AIs was in charge in the bunker. Big Aleph had detected David's personal digital assistant and shut her down remotely. The message was a personal gag put in by his programmer friend, Lia Baumann, who was also his wife. It was a line spoken by the evil computer in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and it played every time Miss Aleph powered down.

Workers were still screwing down modular consoles and testing holographic displays in the big situation room.

"We've just torn the wrapper off this place," Boaz said.

A big brass engraving near the ceiling had a quote from Ben-Gurion:

THE ENTIRE NATION IS AN ARMY,
THE ENTIRE COUNTRY THE FRONT LINE.

"Lia worked on Big Aleph until the final phase," Boaz said. "She's very bright and loyal."

Loyal for a Gentile, David thought. His wife was Bedouin Christian and the highest security clearances were given only to Jews. Maybe he was being paranoid. He shouldn't let what Yossi said get to him, about his own parentage being unknown. Of course, it was a fact no matter how smart or accomplished someone was, the top level jobs were reserved for Jews only. That was just the way it was ever since the passing of the Nation-State laws.

"From here we can visualize all the land, sea, and air forces of the IDF."

"That's not new," David said.

"How we use the information is," Boaz said. "We can zoom out to see how combined IDF forces are positioned. We can track down to the level of the individual ship, aircraft, soldier, or drone. Their biological signs, even their

mental state, are all fed into the mainframe.”

“You’d better turn that last feature on only in times of war,” David joked. “Otherwise you’ll find what’s on the minds of most soldiers is a lot of fantasy humping.”

Boaz went on as though he had not heard. “Big Aleph can project into the future and ‘see’ the battlefronts days or weeks in advance. With this system, the Six-Day War would have only taken two.”

David shook his head.

“A wise soldier once said, ‘A perfect tactical plan is like a unicorn. Anyone can tell you what one looks like. No one has actually ever seen one.’”

That got his brother mad.

“They’ve never met Big Aleph,” Boaz said sharply. “Israel’s defense is too important to leave to anyone else.”

Prime Minister Drach had something to say. The room went quiet. She was a person with that kind of power.

“My father grew up on a kibbutz, in a children’s house.” Minister Drach’s stern demeanor gave way to fond nostalgia. “He and the others were together all day while their parents worked. It was a wonderful time.

“Whenever he heard air-raid sirens or rifle fire, even sitting alone in a small shelter, he told me his mind did not wander to its darkest territory.

“Why? Because he knew: in Tel Aviv on Keren Kayemet Boulevard, there was a house. On the second floor there was a long corridor, and at the end of the corridor there was a door. Behind the door was a wise man who made decisions. Ceaselessly this man thought about Israel’s safety, its people’s security. He pulled mighty levers to secure the country’s future.

“In my father’s time, that was Ben-Gurion. Today, it is the artificial intelligence Big Aleph.”

“There,” Boaz said with all the dramatic flair of his presentations in middle-school social studies, which David knew he had modeled on old

videos of Alan Dershowitz because he'd seen him practicing in a mirror.

A newly installed console powered up and threw a constellation of colored holographic dots into the air.

"We have nearly thirty thousand unmanned aerial vehicles in the air. We monitor one hundred thousand transmitting devices in space, including the flood of nano-satellites private companies have been sending up. No human could control it all."

The rabbi had taught his children to leave a blank space at the end of their work. This was for a discussion about what would happen if the main assumption of an essay became untrue.

"Why do we have to do that, Papa?" young David had asked. School was six days a week and homework many hours a day.

The rabbi had scratched under his full beard and replied, "A wise economist once said: 'If the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do?'"

In the situation room, something nagged at David. The First Intifada had started with a traffic collision and four dead. Within hours, the IDF was facing mobs of hundreds of thousands of rock-throwing civilians. It was a human tide only stopped by mobilizing one hundred thousand soldiers, a hail of live bullets, and literally "breaking Palestinian bones."

"The past two intifadas happened without planning, without warning," David said. "Could Big Aleph have predicted them?"

"David, once again, you're failing Occam's Razor."

Damn he hated his brother when he talked like that. He sounded like the rabbi. However, their father had read Plato in the original Greek and could recite passages from the Dead Sea scrolls in Aramaic. Boaz was always more interested in things and systems. He had degrees in engineering and public administration, which had come in handy during his years as Yossi's protégé.

"You assume because something is unanticipated that the great majority of similar events have not been spotted and prevented from becoming

calamities. For example, the advent of 3D-printer-manufactured firearms was one of Big Aleph's first predictions. In response, we've issued soldiers Rhino-Skin body armor and started monitoring electricity use in the territories."

David responded quickly. "Of course they know you're watching, so they'll take the next step, they'll go off-grid." David shook his head. "Put garbage into an AI and all you get out is gibberish on steroids."

"We haven't put all our eggs in the AI basket," the prime minister said. "The strategic defense is completely separate."

Strategic defense. That was code for Israel's nukes. Those would come into play if someone dropped an H-bomb on their little homeland. Even David had only a vague idea about Israel's nuclear deterrent. There were two very new submarines, hardened Air Force hangars, and silo depots, probably near Dimona in the Negev Desert. Publicly, one never spoke about the country's nuclear weapons.

"15 May 1948," Drach said solemnly. "That was the first time they came at us to drive us into the sea: Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, even little Yemen and the Holy War Army. If ever there was the time to destroy us, it was then."

"Filthy murdering sons of whores," Eli Weissach said, speaking for the first time.

"The Arabs were badly misled. They paid the price," the prime minister said, admonishing the head of the Shin Bet. "To be honest, though, they could have given us a decent timeout after World War II."

"In 1948, Arabs killed one percent of all the Jews in Israel at the time," Boaz said emphatically. He hardly ever became so animated. "A third of them were unarmed civilians."

"Today all the pharaoh's horses and all his men cannot dislodge us," Drach concluded. "You're right, David. A new intifada is our major concern."

The prime minister activated a wall map.

“It is apparent to anyone who can count that there are two and a half million Palestinian Arabs in Judea and Samaria on the west bank of the Jordan River, two million in Gaza, nearly five million more across the river in Jordan. Another two million Arabs live inside Israel as citizens. We have just over seven million Jews. In several strategic areas like Nazareth and Hebron, Jews are an absolute minority within the city limits.”

With her stylus, she unlocked an icon on the screen labeled:

שחר אדום Red Dawn.

“Even if we assume the best, some of those Arabs are not predisposed to the continued existence of the ‘so-called’ State of Israel.”

David had studied sustained urban warfare in war college.

“Airpower is of limited use,” he said. “We can’t bomb our own cities. Armor could protect troops going into the fighting. Remember, 150 Hezbollah militiamen who were dressed as civilians pinned down our battalion at Bint Jbeil in 2006. We’d have to be even more careful in our own streets.”

“Therefore: Red Dawn.” The prime minister nodded to Boaz. “It was largely your idea. Explain.”

“Red Dawn is the country’s last line of civilian defense. The last-ditch civilian emergency plan assumes that an uprising, a monstrous Third Intifada, will be too violent and widespread to crush quickly. The fighting will be house to house, even hand to hand. We are ready.”

The picture zoomed in on a typical settlement street.

“Each civilian sector has dragon’s teeth. They come up from roadways, creating an instant maze to which we have the only key. Within each section are secure weapons caches of the most advanced small arms in the world: Sabre smart grenades, Gilead sentry robots.”

“And millions of rounds of ammunition,” Eli added with menace.

“Mayors and local civil-defense leaders have the locations and access

codes. Nearly all Jewish citizens have been through IDF basic training because of universal conscription for men and women in Israel. The HAGA Home Front volunteers have been training for years to stop insurgents in their tracks and minimize Jewish casualties.”

David saw tunnels, fighting cells, strategies borrowed from the Viet Cong and other advanced guerilla fighting forces. It was a good plan. He hoped it would never go into effect.

“Initially they might be able to breach the walls and cause damage,” Boaz said. “Soon, though, we would seal them off from support with tanks and airpower, and then progressively contain them like the body does with an infection. We would bleed them dry and eliminate them.”

David could see a small problem. “Civilians can’t handle prisoners. Under this scenario, local militia would be taking thousands of Arab insurgents captive in each city.”

“If Red Dawn is implemented,” Eli Weissach said with eager coldness, “there won’t be any prisoners.”

“But,” the prime minister said quickly, “this is all theoretical. With deterrence and a strong intelligence network, this is only a distant last resort. An alternative to the annihilation of the Jewish State.”

A few minutes later, Drach took David aside and offered him a three-month paid leave. He had every reason to take it.

“I could use a break from counting orange trees,” David said, joking about his cover job in the citrus division of the Agriculture Ministry. Yet, as he thought about taking time off, the thought of going away with his wife, Lia, to somewhere from which it might take days to get back in an emergency irked him. “But, Prime Minister, with Iraq coming apart at the seams... Jordan could be next. Mossad reports their Hashemite monarchy has never been more vulnerable. From Al Qurayyat to Jerusalem is only one hundred miles. If S-500 SAMs were deployed...”

Miri Drach held up her hand.

“Major Baumann, don’t worry so much. Go. Enjoy. Israel will still be here when you get back.”

4

KIRYA TOWER TEL AVIV

BOAZ

Boaz Baumann's hands thrust into his pockets, clenched in anger. He could barely keep upright, his loathing seemed to make the room spin. He leaned against a concrete pillar and watched his brother David swagger out the doors of the secure Kiryat underground command center. Since Yossi's murder, the constant pressure and misery had drained him to exhaustion, to distraction. Only one thing kept Boaz from showing it: fear.

Boaz had always hated David. Now he feared him as well. Never more so than during the past twenty-four hours. At least he was being sent on holiday. David would not be able to cause more terrible damage to their cause. His, at best, ignorant assassination of Yossi had been bad enough.

On the other side of the room Eli Weissach, the blond battle-scarred Shin Bet chief, was about to say something. With a small gesture, Prime Minister Miri Drach kept him quiet.

"Let's reconvene at the Knesset," she said, her edged voice echoing off the bare concrete ceiling. Drach was always paranoid, especially inside Defense Department buildings. She only felt fully secure in places like Jerusalem's parliament complex, which were completely controlled by the Shin Bet paramilitary.

The pneumatic door hissed shut behind David.

Eli started again. “We’ve got to—”

“We will talk more at the Knesset,” Drach said, cutting the impetuous blond thug off. “Take Boaz in your car. He’s a cabinet member now. Security rules require we travel separately.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Boaz was grateful. The trip back to the Knesset compound in Jerusalem would give him time to consider his next moves. David’s recent actions were a wrecking ball which he had willfully smashed through years of planning. Boaz had to find out how deeply David was involved with the Daggers of Ehud and Prime Minister Drach’s plans for the Apocalypse.

...

Eli Weissach led the way out of the Kirya complex. The man was neither dumb nor subtle. He would finish off a wounded terrorist with a rock rather than wait a few minutes for them to bleed to death. Eli had an attack dog’s cunning instincts. If he even suspected...

“You two,” Eli barked at two Shin Bet operators in full combat gear. “Roll with identical cars in front and behind us. Switch positions after each turn. You’re escorting a cabinet minister.”

“Sir!”

Boaz smiled. “I’m sure three guards are enough. With you along, I feel invincible.”

A tall squat-faced man with a shaved head and sunglasses held the SUV door for them.

“Remind me, Minister,” Eli said sarcastically, “you were conscripted to the Army but took alternative service?”

“My father’s idea. He was still thinking I’d become a rabbi.”

They settled into the armored vehicle. Eli nodded to the man in the driver’s seat. The actual driving was done by a little piece of Big Aleph’s digital brain. It would send out false images and transponder signals to confuse

anyone trying to track them.

“What did that alternative Army service involve again?”

Eli knew bloody well. He was just having at him for being acting minister of defense without ever having held a gun.

“We planted trees in the Negev,” Boaz said tersely. “More like grass, to stop erosion.”

“I bet you do-gooders wet yourselves when the Gazans sent up the incendiary kites and burned all your hard work to shit.” Eli found the acts of sabotage committed by the Gazan Palestinians amusing. “You know when we stopped allowing balloons into the Gaza Strip, they used condoms. You know, for your dick.”

The poster-ready model of a Jewish stormtrooper had a knack for over explaining.

“The Arab savages filled them with helium,” Eli continued, “attached magnesium devices with simple fuses and sent them on the wind into Israel. Fucking condoms. What the fuck, huh?”

“Even the scorched earth can renew itself,” Boaz said, looking out the window as they slid smoothly onto the major transport artery.

Eli made sure the driver partition was secure.

“You bet it will,” he said in a conspiratorial and somewhat lustful tone. “After this next war, Israel will bloom like never before. Say, do you think Drach will let you stay on as defense minister? Since you’ve never been in the real IDF?”

The prime minister would already have slapped Eli’s big mouth shut. There was a reason they were traveling fifty miles east to the parliament buildings just to continue their conversation.

The large blond man’s piercing eyes stared steadily at him. Boaz had no doubt that if he gave a wrong answer, he would end up like Yossi, except his assassination would not be so neatly organized. Boaz returned a wise and knowing smile, one he had long ago copied from his father’s repertoire of

enigmatic rabbinical expressions.

“Mr. Weissach, there are many ways to be dangerous, besides shooting a gun.”

5

US EMBASSY ANKARA, TURKEY

ELLIE

“Hey, you, Jew!” a protester yelled outside the side window of their car. “Get ready for the *real* Holocaust!”

The last word was punctuated by a gob of saliva, which coated the passenger-side window in front of Ellie Sato’s face. The raging protester was pushed forward by the massed mob. His unshaven cheek pushed up against the spittle-covered glass. Hands scrabbled furiously, yanking at the door latch. It was locked. The limo pushed through a ring of Turkish soldiers who swatted left and right with long clubs.

“Don’t mind them,” Ellie’s UK consulate-issued minder said. Her nametag read “Hatice.” Her very lightly made-up lips were pursed in a calm smile. She tapped the two inches of tempered glass. “We are quite safe in here. The glass is very strong. Made in Turkey. This whole car could be blown to bits, and the glass would survive.”

“That’s comforting.”

A dull *thud* made her duck down into her plush leather seat.

Why the heck was she here? Right now, unemployment, embarrassment, and underachievement all seemed like better options than the dismemberment the angry crowd of mostly bearded men seemed to have in store for her. On

the private diplomatic flight in, she had recalled why she had been so keen on covering the Kurdistan story. The epiphany that she must break out of the rut of just being a fashion reporter had come to her at a BUMS dinner in Oxford.

Balliol Undergraduate Maths Society (BUMS) dinners were the math department's excuse to get drunk and make trigonometry jokes. Any alum of Balliol from any discipline had a standing invite. At the Buttery Hotel bar, dressed in a fuchsia ball gown, with a fitted bodice and full skirt appropriate to the black-tie dress code, she had felt like an utter chavvy hooligan.

Everyone else from her year and younger was a CEO or an ambassador to someplace fabulous like Malta. When they took out their handsets and looked up what she was doing, she could sense them snickering at her latest *Juggernaut* article: "Sheer Tights and Climate Change: Do Pantyhose Have a Future in a Warming World?"

As soon as she had finished her complimentary BUMS drinks, she had done a runner. On the way back to London, sitting in a train car that smelled of cat pee, she vowed something was going to change.

But did it have to be this drastic? she wondered as something hard slammed into the windshield up front. It was a pole with a rope noose attached. The noose was wrapped around the neck of a poorly made effigy. It had a huge nose, was dressed in gray-striped clothing, and had a six-pointed gold star pinned to it.

Ellie's newly manicured nails dug into her seat as she smiled at her companion, Hatice. "Well, that's something you don't see every day."

Ellie's previous experience being in the midst of mindless mobs was confined to a crush of thrashing eight-year-olds when she had covered the Boxing Day sale at Hamley's Toy Store on Regent Street.

"It's nothing, really," Hatice assured her. "They think anyone Western-looking with nice clothes is Jewish." She spoke as though witnessing the antics of naughty children. "Also, you are wearing the Jewish national symbol."

Ellie didn't know much about anti-Semites other than they were horrid people who shouted unconscionable things and wore baggy corduroy pants with red suspenders. On the topic of her own outfits and accessories, she was quite certain.

"Whatever do you mean?"

The local woman pointed to the cap of the fountain pen in her pocket. On the top of the cap was a white star with six points.

"That's a snow cap design," Ellie said. "It's supposed represent the top of the highest mountain in Europe: Mont Blanc. Even the nib of every Montblanc pen has the height of the mountain engraved on it: 4,810 meters."

Hatice smiled politely. "If you say so," she said with a conspiratorial wink. "Also, you are not wearing a head scarf."

"Oh, sorry, I thought in the car..." Ellie unfolded the plainest Hermes scarf she had and tucked it under her chin. They finally made it through the set of gates to the US embassy.

"These are not the people to worry about," her guide said blithely. "They are ignorant peasants from the country. They think all Americans are Jews, especially Abraham Lincoln."

"Let me guess, because of the beard and the hat."

Hatice looked out the window. "We'll be through soon."

"Why are they protesting?"

The girl leaned forward. "For money," Hatice whispered. "They pay them and bring them in buses from the countryside and tell them where the infidel embassy is. It's all play-acting."

Despite the reassuring words of the translator she'd been assigned by the Foreign Office, it was hard for Ellie not to take the mob's energy negatively.

"Behind the mobs, in the shadows, that is where they lurk, the really awful ones. Turkish hardliners oppose the USA's support of Kurdish independence."

"Even though it's only Iraqi territory that will be the new homeland of the

Kurds?”

Ellie’s research had revealed that ethnic cleansing had claimed millions of Kurdish lives over the centuries. They were finally getting a land of their own.

“There are more than thirty million Kurds in the region,” Hatice said. “They live throughout parts of Turkey, Syria, and the former Iraq. Once they have their own country, the ultra-conservative Turkish nationalists fear they will make demands to expand onto Turkish provinces where Kurds are a majority.

“The hardliners want to crush the PKK, the Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê resistance. They want to expand regionally, back to when the Turkish Ottoman Empire ruled all the way to Egypt.”

“That was hundreds of years ago. You really are attached to your history.”

“Here,” Hatice said, averting her gaze from a big African-American Marine who peered through the window, “history is inescapable.”

...

One last rock thumped on the limousine’s roof. Ellie hoped the British government got a discount on car repairs. They had been kind enough to send the car and Hatice to take her to the US embassy, where she would be getting her visa to enter Kurdistan on the day it became a country. They entered the underground garage.

Up the elevator and past a weapons and explosives sensor, she arrived at a rather small receiving area.

“Hello,” she said in her best estimation of how a world-weary foreign correspondent would speak. “Ellie Sato, *Citizen Juggernaut*, London.”

“Please sign in,” said a chubby man in a sweat-stained uniform.

The ballpoint dangling from the clipboard had no ink. She whipped out her inflammatory snow-capped fountain pen and signed in bold lavender ink.

Moments later, she had exchanged most of her stuff and all of her recording devices for a bar-coded receipt.

“That way, please,” sweaty man said, pointing.

Past the first doorway, two Marines in parade dress uniforms stood on their side of what she at first thought was a green pillar. It was actually a very buff and amazingly solid-looking young man in olive drab. She was caught between a smile and a salute.

“I’ll take this little lady from here.”

Ellie was above average height, especially for a Eurasian, but she did feel tiny next to this fellow, who made the Marines look like toy soldiers.

“Ms. Sato, I’m Atticus Reidt.” He extended a polar-bear-sized hand, and she was unsure of whether she should shake it or pet it.

“Pleased to meet you, Captain Reidt,” Ellie said. “How can I help the US Army today?”

The hunky Atticus led her to a door. This one was controlled from behind six inches of tempered glass by a serious-looking civilian with pockmarked cheeks.

“Most people assume I’m a jarhead.” Atticus flashed a grin of white teeth.

Recognizing military ranks was an essential skill if she ever hoped to break out of doing fluff pieces on baking shows at the *Juggernaut*; she had studied up.

“The casual dress uniforms of Marines and Army are very similar. However, the respective shades of green are distinct. Also, your pants belt is completely different.”

“I’ll remember that if I ever have to disguise myself.”

The door clicked open. If Ellie’s ears were not playing tricks on her, a pressure seal had popped. Whatever lay beyond was probably more complicated than a routine visa application into Kurdistan.

“After you, Ms. Sato.”

In the second room, two other men waited. They sat at a plain bare desk. Behind them was another pressure door, which led deeper into the embassy complex. The first man rose to his feet. Even before he spoke she recognized

him as unmistakably British.

“Thanks for coming all this way. I’m sure things will get sorted very quickly.” He offered a limp hand. “I’m Tennyson Sewart, deputy UK attaché.”

Ellie thought that name sounded familiar.

“Oxbridge?” she asked.

“And Hurtwood,” Mr. Sewart answered, quickly confirming that even though he was a civil servant, he belonged to a family that was upper-class posh.

“Peer?”

“We’re in Burkes,” Tennyson said rather defensively.

Ellie noticed the befuddled looks on the Americans.

“It’s a British thing,” Ellie said. “You wouldn’t understand.”

The final fellow in the small room was nearly androgynous. He remained motionless in a way that made the other men’s hospitable gestures seem like cavemen thumping their chests. He had wispy hair and almost no eyebrows.

“This is Mr. Perdix. He’s from a special US Department of Defense group.”

“Did anyone tell her about security?” Mr. Perdix said absently as he poked at a handheld device.

“Mr. Perdix, charmed.”

Lizard-like eyes moved from her over to Captain Atticus. “She is your last-ditch idea?”

“I’ve vetted her myself.” Even the muscular soldier seemed wary of Mr. Perdix. They locked gazes for a moment. “If you’ve got a better idea, we can stamp this nice lady’s visa and let her be on her way.”

Mr. Perdix twitched his head, which for him was probably the same as a shrug.

Tennyson Sewart took a deep breath and said, “Ms. Sato, we would like you to spy for us.”

6

**KIRYA
TEL AVIV**

DAVID

After meeting with Prime Minister Drach and being ordered to go on vacation, David got up to the lobby area. The two head rabbis and their boss, Mrs. Stein, had already gone. He debated waiting.

He woke up Miss Aleph.

“I’m awake, Dave.”

“My father will be done soon. I’ll wait.”

“Your father will be a while. According to his Ministerial agenda, he is investigating allegations about the contents of vegan combat rations. There was some scandal about non-kosher sunflower seeds being used.”

On the other hand, he could go.

David walked toward the parking lot. The midday sun struck his exposed skin like astringent. Sharp. It woke him up. Shade was for sissies.

“While we were parked, three apparent civilians walked past our vehicle.”

Miss Aleph had downloaded external and internal surveillance of his car.

“No one has interfered with it. Turning on your car ignition. Recommended safe distance is fifty meters.”

“No one’s going to blow up the car. Quit with the paranoia.”

“Will you be driving yourself?”

“You drive.”

Miss Aleph eased the car forward. At the parking lot exit, they stopped for

a woman. She was clad in black from head to toe and carried a chicken by its neck. David's mind wandered.

At the next traffic light, an IDF soldier in full tactical gear put his hand up to stop a man pushing a cart of oranges. In the smart-glass windscreen, David saw the soldier was painted green. The car's mechBrain operating system had an automatic friend/foe algorithm. GPS tags, facial recognition, social media posts, known associates were all factors in analyzing what the car's cameras picked up. This Bedouin Arab man was outlined in yellow.

Something nagged at David about the civil defense plan Red Dawn. Putting stockpiles of weapons, no matter how safely secured, in and around population centers could be trouble.

"Estimated time to home: eighteen minutes."

He was just about to ask that. His wife, Lia, had probably amped up Miss Aleph's intuition algorithms. She was a top programmer with the second-highest IDF security clearances. Probably thought she was being helpful, protecting him, even. However, changes to his personal AI's code were making Miss Aleph jumpy and neurotic.

A news channel came on.

He hadn't asked for the news. He nearly told her to turn it off, but it was regional breaking news, which might have security implications.

The inset picture in the smart windscreen showed Professor Greene of the Abu Dhabi School of Economics. He had jowls and enormous teeth, and there were spots on his bald scalp.

"The unstable Iraqi government in Baghdad is refusing to recognize an independent Kurdistan. They are accusing its leadership of being American and European puppets."

An announcer asked the interviewee: *"But you can see their point, can't you? If Iraqi Kurds are allowed to split off and declare independence, what's to stop the Sunni Iraqis in the north or the Shi'a in the south from declaring independence?"*

"Nothing. It all comes back to the terrible way Imperialist Britain

dismantled the Ottoman Empire after the First World War. The imperialists had no regard for geographic or ethnic realities. The disintegration of Iraq is just another spark to a tinder-dry potential bonfire. It is something this troubled part of the world does not need.”

“Off.”

The news feed was replaced by a sharp, clear image of an Imperial Eagle flying over some desert hills.

One thing the commentator had right: trouble always seemed to find its way to Israel, David thought. What a blessing it would be if, just this once, they could manage to keep from lighting the next bonfire until after he got back from vacation.

7

US EMBASSY ANKARA, TURKEY

ELLIE

Ms. Sato, we would like you to spy for us.

“What?” Ellie couldn’t help blurting.

As senior Lifestyles reporter at the *Juggernaut*, she had been asked to do ethically dubious things. Mostly those involved introducing dirty old men to young anorexic models in exchange for free clothes and accessories. But spying? They had to be joking, she thought as she squirmed silently on the metal seat of her chair. The Foreign Office man Tennyson Sewart also looked a bit uncomfortable.

“Maybe ‘spy’ is too strong a word. It implies an ongoing travail,” he explained. “We want you to do us one small favor. In return, we’ll do you a much larger one. How does that sound?”

She’d always realized a supreme test of her journalistic ethics would come. However, she had always envisioned being offered gobs of money to suppress pictures of a billionaire she had caught sexually interfering with livestock.

This was a much easier call to make.

“Absolutely not. I am a journalist,” she declared and half believed it herself. “You must have people for that sort of thing.”

“Time is, uh, short, and the personnel we sent in—”

Sharp looks between Mr. Perdix and Mr. Sewart told Ellie their “people” had probably met with a sticky end.

“In that case, double absolutely not.” She had seen what happened to journalists in foreign embassies. Bone saws happened. Being smuggled to the airport in several pieces of hand luggage happened. Even if the luggage was Luis Vuitton, that was not in her future.

“It’s a small act of patriotism,” Sewart said unctuously. He must be the third or fourth son of landed gentry. He had an exaggerated Etonian accent and a bullyish way of brown-nosing.

“I patriotically demand my lawyer,” Ellie said curtly. She hoped the *Juggernaut* would not get her a budget local one.

“Under the new National Service Act, we could conscript your services.” Sewart also had a toff’s native ability to turn nasty very quickly. “We’ve prepared documents to immunize you for any prosecution or risks.”

That sounded ridiculous. Ellie had just been inches away from someone who wanted to tear her head clean off just on the off chance she was Jewish. There was no immunity from a knife in the back.

“Since you brought legalities into it...” Ellie’s pub-owning parents had not poured millions of pints to send her to Oxford and Kyoto universities for nothing.

She turned to the handsome and mildly amused Captain Atticus.

“I can’t help but notice that we are legally in United States jurisdiction. I formally request asylum. This man is threatening my freedom of thought, of movement, and has implicitly threatened me with degrading treatment.” She narrowed her eyes at Mr. Sewart. “And possibly torture. I request an official hearing.”

Sewart cringed. The American soldier laughed. Mr. Perdix checked the clock.

“She’s got you there, Mr. Sewart,” Atticus said, his Southern-accented

voice booming in the small secure conference room. “If you continue harassing her, I may have to get the guards to put you in a holding cell. The asylum application should take about two or three months.”

“This isn’t funny,” the Englishman whined.

Mr. Perdix looked bored. “We’re wasting time.”

“All right, then. Here.” Sewart opened a brown leather binder. “We’re prepared to extend you full diplomatic immunity.”

Ellie’s senses of intrigue and fear were instantly heightened. They did not just hand out full credentials to anyone. They must really need what she brought to the table. In that case, there was only one thing to say: “And...?”

“Sorry, I miss your meaning. I am offering to make you untouchable. You could steal the Turkish crown jewels, if there is such a thing, and no one could prosecute you.”

“My meaning is clear: What else is in it for me?”

“I don’t think the little lady is bluffing,” Atticus said.

“Oh, tripes,” Sewart said with exasperation.

Captain Atticus held out the additional carrot.

“As you know, the US has sponsored Kurdish independence. They are not a rich country. The US has offered to handle non-Kurdish visa applications for businesspeople and journalists.”

He took a hologram decal out of an envelope.

“We’ve had quite a few reporters apply to enter the new country to cover the declaration of independence. Those can be delayed twelve hours. I can slap this baby into your travel documents right now.”

“And...”

The three men turned various shades of pink.

“The eternal thanks of a grateful nation,” Sewart said. “Best and final.”

Ellie was not much of a gambler, but it seemed exciting. She decided to raise the stakes.

“I’ll also be wanting an exclusive interview with Kurdistan’s new

president.” She checked her notes. “Mr. Kofta, right?”

Atticus chuckled. “Ms. Sato, I think that’s a Kurdish spiced meatball dish.”

Ellie had gotten her food suggestions mixed in with her political notes. No matter, she still felt she had the upper hand.

“Whoever the fellow is. Make it a twenty-four-hour exclusive window during which he gives no one else an interview, and I’ll do any spying which does not involve full-frontal nudity.”

Sewart pursed his thin lips and inclined his head slightly.

Mr. Perdix pulled out an oblong object. It was velvety black and drank in the harsh artificial light glaring down on the polished table. The object’s surface returned only multicolored sparkles from deep within its resin.

“Do you know what this is?”

“It’s a Montblanc Celestial Night Diamond pen.” She whipped off the cap. This piece was definitely on her billionaire blackmail wish list. “Number six gold nib, piston filled. Looks genuine. It’s an early model.”

She juggled it in her hand. Something about it was off.

“Apart from being a rising star in UK journalism,” Sewart explained tersely, “Ms. Sato is also an established calligraphy and fountain-pen expert.”

What an odd thing to know about her, Ellie thought. Why would these people care?

Mr. Perdix cut right to it. “We’d like you to visit the office of Anatoly Borkin. When you are there, you are to switch this pen for the one sitting on his desk.”

Borkin was half Russian, half Turkish and was probably the most powerful private citizen in the country. Like most oligarchs, he was rumored to be familiar with bone saws.

“Ah, okay, let me think that over at my hotel.”

“It’s on for this afternoon,” Sewart said.

“This Borkin guy’s real eager to talk to you,” Atticus said. “We’ll be with you every step of the way.”

Is that what they had said to their other people? The disappeared ones?

“The Turks are extremely proud of their part in the space-elevator race,” Mr. Perdix said. Ellie guessed he was the scientist among this little press gang. “It’s a reliable way of getting heavy loads into orbit without using rocket fuel. It would revolutionize space exploration. Borkin’s company figured out how to use Turkey’s resources of boron and thorium to produce diamond nanowires, which are strong enough to tether a satellite orbiting the Earth.”

“But you’re not going to tell me the whole story.”

“That would be imprudent for all concerned,” Mr. Sewart said. In other words, if she were caught and waterboarded, they wanted to limit what she could reveal.

She looked closely at the Celestial Night pen. “It would also be imprudent to try fooling Mr. Borkin with this pen. There’s a mistake.”

“Not possible,” Mr. Perdix said pointedly. “My best people constructed an exact match to the one on his desk, right down to the ink inside.”

“Then your best people are completely gormless.”

“What mistake?” Atticus asked.

“I’ll tell you what I know,” Ellie said deliberately, “if you tell me what you know.”

She looked at the three faces. They were stoic but concerned.

“Gosh, look how quickly it’s approaching tea time.”

Sewart’s face was a war of outrage, caution, and general confusion. The man would be UK’s prime minister in no time.

Atticus shuffled his feet.

Mr. Perdix was running the show.

“We’ve been watching the space-elevator efforts closely,” the melanin-deprived man said. “The European effort is the most advanced. They were the first to develop a material strong enough to extend thousands of kilometers straight up to anchor an orbiting station.”

“I bet you guys in the USA have been watching,” Ellie said to Atticus. She knew that much space news. “The tether NASA tried last year broke, and you lost your space station.”

“It’s not lost,” Atticus said, standing up for the USA. “We know exactly where it is.”

“Recently, we have determined Boris’s company has been producing more diamond nanowire than needed.”

“You want to know where it’s going.”

“That’s all we can say. Now you,” Sewart said rather bluntly. “If you’re bluffing—”

“Satos never bluff.” She picked up the decoy pen. “Here. When you post it —”

“What?” Sewart looked at her as though she was speaking gibberish.

“Posting. It’s what pen geeks call it when you take the cap off and put it on the end.” She did that. “The top part of this one, under the piston knob, is threaded. When you post the cap on Celestial Night, the clip should line up with the nib. This one doesn’t.”

She rolled the pen across the otherwise empty desk. It stopped in front of Mr. Perdix. “Montblanc would never let a product like this leave the factory. This fellow you’re trying to fool will know it has been tampered with.”

The American scientist actually showed emotion. Grabbing the pen, he stormed out through the other pressure door.

Captain Atticus’s ice-blue eyes twinkled.

While Mr. Perdix was gone, she asked for her passport to be stamped and if Captain Atticus would be so kind as to confirm her diplomatic credentials registered as genuine on the American system.

“The government of the United Kingdom would not try to cheat you,” Sewart protested.

“You would try to corrupt, coerce, and conscript me.”

“She’s got you there,” Atticus said. “Again.”

Now that she thought about it, bending of her journalistic ethics called for a deal-sweetener.

“You know what would thrill my parents, Mr. Sewart?” Ellie said. “A Christmas card from the Royal Palace. The address is: the Hogs Head Pub in Alnwick, Northumberland. Have you got a pen?”

8

JERUSALEM

BOAZ

The government AI driving their armored SUV stuck to Jewish-only highway lanes. Long lines of cars with green license plates stacked up in front of checkpoints. Green was for noncitizen Arabs. Yellow plates were for Jewish-Israeli citizens. Muslim, Druze, and Christian citizens had white plates with blue lettering. Boaz's vehicle had platinum plates.

"Super-Jew" platinum plates, as the media derogatorily called them, were new. Technically any citizen of Israel could apply for them, but only a dozen non-Jews passed the security clearances and paid the large annual fee.

Very quickly they arrived in Jerusalem.

The Knesset parliament complex was located between the wide streets and modern low-rises of the new areas of the city and the Downtown Triangle. After that, in the direction of the walled Old City, came areas like Musrara, where David's in-laws lived. Broad boulevards turned into narrow brick-lined lanes, which led to the rusty gates of quiet residential enclaves.

Boaz looked to the opposite seat. Eli Weissach seemed eager to get to the Knesset. The parliament buildings themselves always struck Boaz as an uneasy architectural mashup between Bauhaus and a Greek temple. The grounds were sparse. More than anything else, the parking lot and parade ground looked like a football stadium.

On the other hand, the place had never suffered a terror attack. The whole compound was easily defensible. Paving stones had been specially designed to accommodate tanks and heavy weapons platforms. The flat, broad roof of the Knesset was packed with antiaircraft and antirocket weapons. But the real labyrinthine centers of power were underground; that was where they were headed.

Eli got out of the car and held the door for Boaz in as condescending a way as he could. After all, Eli was the battle-scarred head of the Shin Bet, which was Israel's version of Britain's MI5 and America's FBI. Boaz was only the warm body temporarily filling a cabinet seat in place of the cold body of the late Minister Yossi.

"Thanks," Boaz said as he got out of the car.

During a nuclear strike, the bunkers here could keep command and control of the IDF long enough to order retaliation via Israel's atomics based on land, air, and at sea inside continent-killer submarines.

Eli consulted his handset.

"You can go to your office," he said. "The prime minister has put us back thirty-five minutes."

Boaz turned up the staircase. Thankfully, Eli did not follow. Yossi's Knesset office, now his office, was on the second floor overlooking the parking lot. If he looked sideways, Boaz could see historic Mount Scopus through the haze.

Two Shin Bet bodyguards took positions in the receiving area. They were really his minders. He was certain they used wireless spy equipment to hack his communications and mobile devices. Fortunately, anything really incriminating was locked in his brain.

His secretary, a large Armenian woman who typed very slowly and was probably also spying on him, was away from her desk.

"Mr. Minister."

It took Boaz a second to realize that he was the minister. The man who had

spoken looked very out of place. He wore a gray-white suit.

“Barton McTavish.” He rose and extended his hand. “Worldwide Help International.”

This is awkward, Boaz thought. WWHI had more staff than the Red Cross and the Red Crescent societies combined. Their budget was larger than the GDP of many countries, including Israel. The Mossad had never been able to put their finger on where exactly their financing came from.

“I know. We’ve met,” he said, taking McTavish’s firm but sweaty hand. “A few months ago, I was carrying Mr. Yossi’s briefcase in Mumbai.”

Barton’s features assumed appropriate sadness. “Terrible loss for your country.”

Boaz ushered him in. His personal office was bugged by the Shin Bet. Voice-to-text transcripts and video files would be filtered through Big Aleph with highlights ending up on Prime Minister Drach’s server. He had to guard his every word and gesture.

For all its size and influence, many people had never heard of Worldwide Help. They worked through hundreds of non-governmental organizations. Their core mission was shrouded in secrecy. When that was penetrated, there appeared to be no one behind the curtain at all.

“I’m with Worldwide Help’s Heritage and Antiquities division,” his visitor said in unaccented English. Barton had thick glasses, a stud earring, and a close-cropped beard. Those features and his vaguely colonial French suit would have made him stand out in Tel Aviv. In Jerusalem, he might as well have worn a neon sign reading “goyim outsider.”

“Not really a Defense Ministry matter.”

“Except for the place where we would like permission to work.” The way he said “we” gave Boaz the chills for some reason he could not explain.

“Completely unobtrusively. No one would even know we’ve been there.”

“I recall now. *That* place. Yes, that would be a defense and security matter.”

For months previous, this man and other WWHI functionaries had been buzzing around lobbying, trying to get access to one of the few places in Israel to which the government of Israel could not grant access.

“The Temple Mount is under the control of the Islamic Waqf,” Boaz said. “It has been for centuries. In 1967, East Jerusalem was captured in the Six-Day War. The first thing my predecessor Moshe Dyan did after we captured the Old City of Jerusalem from the Jordanians was to return the Mount to the exclusive care of the Waqf. To keep the peace.”

Had this bugger asked “How’s that working out?” Boaz would have shown him the door.

Instead, Barton said, “However, there have been excavations on the Mount.”

“Completely unsupervised and not authorized. The Waqf took tons of material from the Mount and dumped it in garbage landfills. Israel Antiquities Authority demanded they stop at once.”

“Our proposed work plan would be very limited. Only a few cubic meters of underground excavation. We could do this without any surface disturbance.”

The Temple Mount was the most politically and religiously sensitive place in the world. The flat-topped plateau had been leveled by Herod the Great. It was the site of the First and Second Jewish Temples. It was also the third holiest site in Islam and historically significant to Christians.

Though it was located in Israel, non-Muslims were strictly barred from certain areas. They could only enter through one gate and were frequently shadowed by Waqf Islamic Police. If Jews on the Mount tried to overtly utter prayers or produced recognizably religious items in plain view, they were promptly thrown out.

The mere visit of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to the Mount in 2000 had set off four years of deadly intifada riots. Any assertion of Israel’s sovereignty could make Muslim fanatics go berserk. Still, Boaz wanted to get

all the facts.

“Where, exactly?”

“Under the Dome of the Rock, beneath the Foundation Stone.”

McTavish had to be kidding. Had he suggested a theme park at Golgotha or disassembling the Kaaba in Mecca, the WWHI man could not have sounded more ridiculous.

The Dome of the Rock was an Islamic shrine built over a huge stone said to be the spot where Abraham was commanded to sacrifice his son Isaac. It was also said by many to be the location of the Holy of Holies in the Jewish temple. Jews called it the Foundation Stone. Muslims believed this same stone, which they called the Sakhrah, was connected to Mohammed’s ascent on the back of the winged horse Buraq to begin his Night Journey.

“Are you insane?”

Barton stared straight ahead and compressed his lips. Boaz realized the man seemed under enormous pressure. How vital could it be? Whatever was under the Temple Mount had never been explored in all of recorded history. It could probably wait.

From his pocket, the man removed a palm-sized fob. It was carbon fiber and crystal with USB ports of various sizes. He slid it across the desk.

“What’s this?”

“The *Ascepilus*,” Barton said sheepishly. “The largest hospital ship in the world. The size of an aircraft carrier, it has two thousand beds, many of which can be converted into cryostasis units.”

“So?”

“It’s yours. Israel’s. A completely legal donation to the State. The executed transfer of registration is in this digital fob, along with all the command codes and schematics.”

Boaz knew of this ship. It was better equipped than the USNS *Comfort*. To build it would cost the entire defense budget of Israel, billions of new shekels. Positioned in the Mediterranean, it could extend first-class medical

care to Israeli soldiers in the field.

In addition to planting grass in the Negev, during his national service, Boaz had applied himself to the study of military logistics. Cryo beds were a new technology that could extend the golden hour for wounded soldiers for days. This strange man was offering a huge technological leap for the IDF. All in exchange for digging up some pot shards and old coins?

“I’ll definitely bring up the offer with the prime minister.” Boaz pushed the fob back to his disappointed guest. “Which reminds me, I’m late for a cabinet meeting.”

The visitor did not take the hint the interview was over.

“You know, Minister Baumann,” Barton McTavish said wearily, “in excavations dating to the time of the First Temple, we’ve found hundreds of icons of the goddess Asherah. These were found inside Jewish homes. In those times, idolatry was punishable by death. Some think this is evidence that Bronze Age Judaism was not monotheistic but duo theistic. Scholars concluded Asherah, or ‘she who treads on the sea,’ was considered a spiritual being equal to her husband, Yahweh.”

“That’s very interesting...”

“My point is, it only takes a small bit of evidence to change everything you’ve ever thought.”

McTavish pushed the billion-shekel fob toward him. It seemed his greatest fear that Boaz would not accept it. “Just don’t cross them,” the bearded man said. “Just don’t.”

Before Boaz could remind McTavish he was speaking to a cabinet minister of the State of Israel, the strange fellow walked out without saying another word. Boaz picked up the fob. The design on it was of a shimmering snake twisted around a tormented-looking staff. He put it in his pocket and walked out the door behind his desk, hurrying to keep his appointment with Prime Minister Drach.

9

KNESSET BUNKER

BOAZ

Only the prime minister knew how many bunkers there were under the Knesset buildings. Built to keep a nuclear-armed enemy guessing, and hopefully failing, during a decapitation strike, they had been upgraded to secure against the increasingly virulent chemical and biological weapons being cultivated in the region.

Even Boaz Baumann's two Shin Bet guards did not know which of the bunkers they were headed to. He entered his security ID, and Big Aleph sent the ThyssenKrupp horizontal elevator down the correct tunnel.

He did not engage the bodyguards in any small talk. Before he had been appointed interim defense minister, he'd tried that. For a week after, all his messages had a few microseconds extra lag time coming and going. Boaz concluded they were getting an extra scrub through anti-sedition and treason-detection algorithms. Becoming friendly with your handlers might be the first step to co-opting them. The Israeli security net and Big Aleph were always on guard.

The doors slid back. Down a corridor, a vault-like entrance clicked open. The guards waited by the lift.

"There you are," Prime Minister Drach said in her mildly brusque tone. "We thought you had gotten lost in the maze."

“Sorry, there was that fellow from Worldwide Help antiques.”

“Again? For a charity, they’re as tenacious as time-share salesmen.”

The room was half as large as the Kirya situation room in Tel Aviv, square, and mostly bare. Fixtures hung from walls, and Pelican cases with electronics inside stood all over. In minutes, these could be assembled into command and control workstations. Blond Eli Weissach sat lithely on a bench, as restless as a caged animal. The vault-like doors sealed shut.

“It’s time,” the prime minister said with certainty.

That’s what Boaz had been afraid of. They were not ready. Thanks to his brother, David, the Yossi fiasco had thrown everything into a tailspin.

“Are you sure?” Boaz said, desperate to buy time. “You’ve been planning contingencies for months. Our group has been planning this for years.”

“Decades,” Drach said. “The time to act is now. I am sure.”

Eli clicked on a regional map on a wall display screen.

“Iraq is finished. It is a failed state,” he said. “The government has kicked out the Americans because they supported Kurdish independence. With the top third of the country gone, Sunni and Shi’a will fight over the remainder of the carcass.”

The last time Kurds declared independence, some ten years ago, only mercenaries and fanatical Iranian Shi’a militia had intervened to slap them down and deny them a homeland. The following decade had not seen the Iraqi government become any less weak or less corrupt. Soon, Iraqi officials would dissolve their government and slink away to their hidey-holes with all the money they had stolen.

“For years I wondered why we were building a big wall between us and Jordan,” Eli said. “Jordan is too cowardly to ever attack us again. It became clear when the prime minister inducted me into the Daggers’ inner circle.

“Jordan is the dumping ground where we will expel the so-called Palestinian Arabs and eventually all the Arabs in Israel. Once the senile Jordanian monarchy is overthrown, that will be their Promised Land. They

are welcome to it.”

“Finally,” Boaz forced himself to agree.

This was his and the rabbi’s worst nightmare. The radical right chimera was composed of the religious Orthodox and extremist secular Zionists. Both groups believed non-Jews had no place in Greater Israel. At its head were the Daggers of Ehad. Yossi had actually been a spy for Rabbi Baumann inside this deep state organization. Prime Minister Drach was the real leader of the Daggers.

“There’s no guarantee fighting will spill over from Jordan into Israel,” Boaz ventured cautiously. Drach’s plan required many elements to work. There were still ways to stop this. “We need an excuse to expel the Arabs from Judea and Gaza. If there’s no new wide-scale intifada...”

“There will be,” Drach said shortly.

“This is one opportunity we’ll make sure the Palestinians do not miss,” Eli said as he zoomed the map in on the new concrete-and-steel border between the West Bank and Jordan. The prime minister’s real plan went beyond expulsion, but Eli did not know that.

“You’d agree, Boaz, that now is the perfect time,” she said. “America has been humiliated in Iraq. The Taliban are back in control of Afghanistan. The Chinese just want to make money. The Russians are the Russians.”

Was there any chance to stall? Boaz had to find out more. Could the Americans stop this madness?

“But the Americans have been supporters of moderate Israel and the peace process for decades. Is there any danger of them interfering?”

“Not with our people working inside Congress and the Pentagon.” Drach smiled. “If they fail, I have a deterrent plan that will keep everyone—Americans, Russia, China—in their own backyards and out of Israel’s business.”

Damn.

“The average American is not the problem; they are just ignorant,” the

prime minister said. “The real traitors are the diaspora Jews in the USA. Year after year, decade after decade, they selfishly try to push Israel into a self-destructive peace process.

“Our own people, the BDS boycott swine, call us ‘fascist’ and ‘racist’ and compare Israel to South Africa’s apartheid system. There is even growing support for a *one state* political solution. Can you imagine that? Seven million Jews and seven million Arabush *in the same country*?” Drach took a sip of water to calm down. “In the future, there will be only one state from the Jordan River to the sea, but there won’t be any Arabs in it. None.”

“Have you given any thought to my idea to ban those American Jewish traitors from making Aliyah under the Jewish Law of Return?” Eli said. “They and their children should be declared permanently non-Jewish.”

“First we pull the weeds out of our own backyard,” Drach said. “Then we worry about trimming the neighbors’ hedges.”

“The Jordanians will fight the Sunni insurgents coming in from Iraq,” Boaz said. “They’ve got one of the best equipped and trained fighting forces in the region.”

“Let them,” Drach said. “I hope many of them die for their ridiculous king.”

Eli drew arrows on the map from Iraq into Jordan. “The Grey Wolves militia supporting the Iraqi Sunni militia will be through their borders before they can react.”

“You gave the Turkish Grey Wolves militia the tritium devices.”

Boaz caught the PM looking at him sharply.

“So?”

“They are basically miniature fusion bombs. Dangerous and volatile technology.”

“No more powerful than your typical MOAB,” Drach said dismissively. “They can’t destroy more than two or three city blocks.”

“We only gave the Wolves enough materials for a hundred,” Eli said.

“Two hundred at most. There’s no way they can get more. We will get what we want, take the Grey Wolves by the scruff of the neck, pull their teeth, and send them to the old pets’ home.”

If only Boaz could convince Drach to wait until they had more information on the proxy militia coming in from Turkey, it would buy him time to stop this madness.

Boaz protested. “They could reverse engineer the devices—”

“They’re only Muslims,” Eli cut him off. “They are savages. They have no science.”

“There is also a limit to the tritium device’s yield,” Drach said. “Not even Einstein and Oppenheimer could make a single bomb yield more than ten tons of TNT.”

Boaz still did not like it. “That’s more firepower than any individual soldier has ever been able to carry. And we gave it to people who are not our friends.”

“They need those weapons to counter the Iranians. Tehran is massing thousands of main line battle tanks and armored vehicles on the Iran-Iraq border. Those need to be stopped at Baghdad.” Eli drew a line around Iraq’s capital on the map. “It’s a perfect deal: Turkey gets control of Sunni-dominated northern Iraq. It will be a buffer zone against their historical enemy, Iran. The Turks install a puppet to replace the Jordanian monarchy, and we export our Arab problem to the East Bank of the Jordan River.”

“That’s my Permanent Peace Plan,” Drach said. “No one will notice until it’s all over. Big Aleph estimates the war will be won in ninety-six hours.”

10

KNESSET BUNKER

BOAZ

“Minister Baumann,” Drach said, “you should put Jericho garrison on the border of Jordan on highest alert.” She turned to Eli Weissach. “There are some other details I need to discuss. Mr. Weissach, will you excuse us?”

The blond head of the Shin Bet left. His guards trailed after. Boaz and the prime minister were entirely alone in the bunker deep under the Knesset compound.

Eli’s departure confirmed something Boaz had always suspected—Eli was not part of the true inner circle of the Daggers of Ehud. Following the strange and inconvenient death of Yossi, as far as he could tell, this club had only two remaining members: Drach and himself.

You have to stop Khóshekh.

Rabbi Baumann’s words rang silently in his ears as he walked over to the prime minister. Was he supposed to kill her? They were alone; there were no listening devices. She would not be talking openly if there were any chance of being recorded. He could do it now.

Unknown to Eli and everyone else not directly involved, Drach had a more drastic and irreversible answer to the Palestinian riddle. The prime minister was planning to release a bioweapon designed to kill millions of Palestinian Arabs. He should kill her now. Afterward, he could order IDF people loyal to

him and his father to force the bioweapons technicians to reveal the locations of the Khóshekh virus.

Boaz looked at a metal paperweight on the desk. It was round like a club, heavy. An engraving on its surface depicted the Western Wall and the Dome of the Rock. He imagined its tarnished silver surface covered with Prime Minister Drach's blood and brain matter.

Once, an Israeli prime minister had been killed for all the wrong reasons. Here, he would be doing the same deed for all the right ones. It would even out the balance sheets of history...

NO! He was not like David.

"What did that Worldwide Help man want?" Her stern flinty vice voice brought him back to reality.

He was no killer. There was no guarantee that eliminating Drach would stop the disaster. Too many wheels had been set in motion. Only Yossi, their ultimate mole inside the Daggers, had known them all. Damn David for killing him.

"He, ah..." Boaz felt sweat on his face. "He wanted to give us a ship."

"A good one?" Her eyes lit up. Even while planning the Apocalypse, here was a woman who would not pass up an opportunity.

"Very. A few billion shekels worth. Nearly brand new. The *Asclepius* hospital ship."

"That would be great for public relations. After the war, I mean. Perfect for a photo op. Take it. We'll need it." Drach looked at the round paperweight on the desk as though she were contemplating a crystal ball. "Even after we win this Ninety-Six-Hour War, I see only flames and death until the whole world is purged of all this filth."

Boaz dug in his pocket. "McTavish was expecting something. Worldwide Help International asks a small favor. They seem to want it very badly."

He handed her the command fob for the *Asclepius*.

"I know what they want," Drach said, looking at the WWHI logo on the

device. “Tell the Navy to take the ship. Anchor it at Haifa. Then stall McTavish.”

Boaz thought a moment. The Worldwide Help man had mouthed something about “not crossing” his organization. Mentioning that would muddle his urgent business with the prime minister. After all, what could a humanitarian group do if they felt cheated, even out of a few billion shekels?

“You don’t intend to approve his request.”

WWHI was large and had a reputation for being dangerous. They employed thousands of private soldiers to protect their schools and hospitals. Even the most fanatical jihadists gave them a wide berth.

The prime minister laughed without mirth. “You know me too well. Just like Yossi. Before he turned on me.”

Drach had sent her best man to remedy that problem. *Damn it all, David!*

“In the end, Yossi did what you wanted,” Boaz ventured cautiously, casually. It was the most burning question in his mind and that of his father. “Despite his misgivings, why did Yossi unlock the last seal on the Khóshekh virus incubator?”

Drach’s eyes stared at him, through him. “Yossi had locked the weapon up with a self-destruct fail-safe. I was close to getting around it. He found out and threatened to go to the Americans and the UN. I had to kill him quietly.”

“The day he died, he unlocked Khóshekh.”

Drach seemed as surprised as he was. “Such a relief when the technicians said they had the virus safe. That was a great day for all of us.”

Boaz had assumed David had tortured Yossi into opening the bio vault. If that were so, Drach would have bragged about it. Boaz felt himself sweating again. He could not appear too curious. If Drach suspected he, the rabbi, and Yossi had been working against the Daggers, he would never leave this bunker.

“Why not let WWHI do their archaeology project? They could use the existing tunnels under the Western Wall.”

“Because I’d have to talk to that vile sheikh from the Waqf!” Drach snapped. Pure venom animated her coal-black eyes. “He controls the Temple Mount. He would demand a meeting before allowing the dig under the Dome of the Rock.”

“I know you don’t like Jerusalem’s Islamic leader. You’ve avoided meeting him all your career, since you were interior minister.”

“Boaz, there isn’t a word in Hebrew, English, or Yiddish hideous enough for how I feel about that pig. The current head of the Islamic Waqf is the direct successor to the original Arab Nazi: Amin al-Husseini. His very existence disgusts me.”

Something was welling inside the woman. Something that gave off the airborne electrical charge of pure insanity. She tried suppressing it. Then gave up.

“Tell me, Boaz, why do you hate the Gazans?” Drach stared at him with piercing eyes that were steel balls glinting under the artificial lights.

This was a test. This was *the* test. Boaz knew it, and his palms started to tingle with nervousness. Everyone knew the story. A version of it was in his profile on the political party’s website, perhaps to show that the much-too-young minister of defense knew what it was like to face danger.

“I was ten,” Boaz said, hoping he did not sound too hesitant. “My father took us all to Sderot for the opening of his colleague’s new yeshiva school. Through the afternoon, everything went well. It was windy. Plastic tablecloths kept blowing off. The lemonade had some strange grit in it. Maybe the water was from the reservoir, not from a desalinization plant. I was sipping some on a swing set in a playground when the alert sirens sounded.

“At first I was more upset about having spilled the lemonade on my trousers. I felt Father would be upset if he saw I’d made a mess while being a guest in someone’s house. Even though we’d practiced civil alert drills in school and my cell phone screen was flashing the red warning light, I did not

have a keen sense of the danger I was in.

“Sixty kilometers away, in Tel Aviv, there’s always more time. A big rocket has to fly higher and farther; you never really see them. But in Sderot, so much closer to Gaza, you might only have a few moments.

“It was dusk, and I’d never been there before. I got turned around and realized I was lost. I ran under a jungle gym, the phone vibrating in my pocket, the loudspeakers urging everyone to get to a hardened shelter. I huddled there, with my pants looking like I’d peed myself and wishing Papa would come. I must have started to cry.

“I must have, because when Ori approached, I could not make her out through my wet lashes. She had just turned six, but she was local and could probably find the bunkers blindfolded.

“She said ‘Don’t be scared’ and took my hand. In no time at all, we arrived on the other side of the community center. Inside the shelter were a half dozen other kids. Most were watching the social media videos of the Israeli interceptor rockets going up to shoot down the jihadi missiles. Some looked at us, snickered at my pants. ‘He peed,’ said a small boy with ratty-looking payot forelocks. ‘As if Jews haven’t had enough humiliation,’ someone else said. Ori pulled me away. ‘Don’t be bothered. We’ll fight back and get even.’

“Nothing fell near us during the whole alert. In forty or fifty minutes, it was over. IDF jets and helicopters were headed out to Gaza. Ori never left me alone. After that, I never saw her again, with her blonde curls and intense blue-gray eyes. Six months later, a rogue rocket fell on Sderot. It hit her house and killed her while she was sleeping.”

That was where the official version of the story ended. Boaz continued.

“That night, in the shelter, I had found a cloth and was mopping my clothes. Ori was giving me advice on how to avoid booby traps dropped by Arab kites or drones. ‘If you see any coloring books or toys lying on the ground, don’t pick them up or else *kahbhuhhh*!’ She waved her little hands.

“When we walked outside, the wind had shifted and was warmer. The sky

was nearly dark, but I could see contrails and gray puffs from missile interceptions. In one area, they looked like a gigantic tic-tac-toe grid.

“Ori glanced in the direction of Gaza for a moment, then back to me. She said sagely, ‘I’ve always known it. It’s pretty obvious one of us is going to be destroyed. It’s going to be them or us. So of course it’s them.’ Then she smiled and asked if I was hungry.”

Drach remained fixated on him throughout his retelling. It was like she was tasting his words, trying to detect any hint of deception. At that moment, there were none. She had forced him to relive this most painful memory, and for just a moment, he really did want to join the prime minister in killing them all.

“Of course,” he said, “you know all this. Ori was your daughter.”

Satisfied, Drach took a locket off a key ring, opened it, and threw it onto the smart-glass table. On one side was a small round picture of Ori, on the other side was a shekel coin crudely struck two thousand years ago by Jewish zealots during the First Jewish Revolt against the Romans. While Drach’s attention was off him, Boaz recovered, he reminded himself whose son he was and what he had to accomplish, somehow.

Drach’s locket was also a data hard drive. Its digital contents spilled onto the backlit surface of the brightly polished table. High-resolution pages of an aged document appeared in orderly folders. Each one was topped with the Imperial Eagle of the Third Reich. In its talons hung a swastika.

“I carry this everywhere to remind myself,” she said. “These are dispatches which were being couriered from Berlin to Rommel in North Africa. They were recently found inside a plane that went down in the Mediterranean during the early part of World War II.”

She ran her finger over the touchscreen table. A picture came up of a deceptively innocuous-looking man who wore his beard trimmed and whose head was covered by a Sunni headpiece.

“It is public knowledge that Sheikh Amin al-Husseini, Imam of Jerusalem,

met several times in person with Adolf Hitler during the 1930s and during the Second World War. It is well known al-Husseini and Hitler were close allies.”

The next black-and-white photograph showed the sheikh presenting the Führer with a Quran, its cover embossed with a golden swastika.

“Specifically what the two discussed had always been shrouded in mystery. Until now.”

She flicked through the images of the tattered pages. Some were in Arabic, most were in German.

“Pages and pages of pretty dry stuff. But here is the important part. Hitler wanted to deport the Jews of Europe, not kill them. He, too, had an Eli problem. Only his most devoted followers would fully implement his Final Solution.

“Hitler wanted to send them to Palestine, which was weakly under British control. Nazi sympathizers in England—and there were more than they will ever admit now—were all for the idea. It would let them wash their hands of a troublesome and unprofitable colony and export their own Jews there in due course.”

She scanned through the pictures on the smart table and came to the famous picture of al-Husseini saluting the all-Muslim Bosnian Waffen SS volunteers in 1943.

“Sheikh al-Husseini was violently opposed to the expulsion plan. He stated quite clearly if any Jews came into Palestine, he would declare a jihad against German interests in North Africa and worldwide. Al-Husseini threatened to attack Rommel’s army and cut off the Reich’s oil.”

She flicked to a passage highlighted in red.

“But that’s not the essence of it. This part of the transcription justifies what we must do now.”

Drach read from a highlighted portion of the text.

“Unable to deport the Jews of Europe, Hitler then asked his ally: ‘What

should I do with them?’ The sheikh replied: ‘Burn them.’”

This was a rumor Boaz had heard in ultra-right-wing circles. If this was proof Arabs had demanded that Hitler carry out the Holocaust, these pages had turned up at a most convenient time. Nevertheless, he was certain Drach believed this narrative wholeheartedly.

“Well, there it is,” she said. “I have always known why you hate the Gazans. Now you know why I’ve quietly worked my entire career to fix the Arab problem in Israel once and for all.”

Boaz’s head spun with the revelations. But really, Drach’s motivations didn’t change anything. It just made stopping the prime minister all the more urgent.

“If anyone ever finds out...” was all Boaz could think to say.

“Ha! People are sheep. For once in our history, we Jews will not be led to slaughter,” Drach said. “I won’t say anything against the six million who died in the Holocaust, just that they went off to the ovens much too meekly. They relied on others to save them.

“There is today a murderous, anti-Semitic tide of Islam sweeping Africa, Asia, and Europe, two billion strong and growing. There are fewer Jews in Britain today than there were in 1900. There are only two synagogues left in France which are not located inside military bases. Sweden is completely free of practicing Jews. And do you know why?”

Drach picked up a slim green book from her desk. It was quite worn and taped over with notes.

“The dark secret is that the Islamists are stronger. For every one of us, there are one hundred of them. They know what they believe; they fight what they hate.”

She ran her thumb down the spine of the well-worn book.

“An Islamic psalm has become part of the charter of Hamas, it says: *The Day of Judgment will not come about until Muslims fight the Jews, when the Jew will hide behind stones and trees. The stones and trees will say, ‘O*

Muslims, O Abdullah, there is a Jew behind me, come and kill him.'

"And what do we say in return? Recently, a famous Jewish philosopher said Judaism must renounce all notions of being a religion. It must become an 'operating system' of secular philosophy." She swore. "What an eloquent death sentence for the Jews. Would you strap a bomb to your child and send them to kill the heathens for the sake of an 'operating system'?"

She threw the book down. "Only fanaticism is belief, only belief is power, and only power is victory. Look at the balance of power in the Knesset. Left wing and Arab Joint List: fifty-seven seats. Right wing and Haredim: fifty-six, with the Russian secularists holding the balance of power among the one hundred and twenty MKs. Annexation has only made the danger greater not less. It will only take one misstep by one weakling prime minister to agree to a 'one-state' solution, and that will be the end!"

Drach shook her tightly coiffed gray-haired head.

"This time, Boaz, there will be no one to save us. For me, 'Never Again' means we shall not let this foul tide wash over Israel. I will prevent it by any means necessary!"

Boaz could not even look in the direction of the paperweight. If might as well have been welded to the desk. Once he had decided not to kill the prime minister, it was impossible to reignite a murderous rage he never truly had. Unable to kill her, he did the only thing he could.

"I am with you, Prime Minister!" Boaz said as vehemently as he could. "If things continue this way, Israel will be one nation. All Palestinians will get to vote and the right of return. Our nation will be Arab, not Jewish."

"Never," the old politician said dryly. Her lips repeated the word silently, and again.

The bitterness of his false betraying words hung on his lips. Boaz had to do something. While assassination was not in his arsenal, after an apprenticeship as Yossi's deputy in the treacherous political waters of the Knesset, backstabbing was second nature. "There might be a problem."

“What?” Drach demanded.

“Who.”

“Speak your mind,” Drach said, sweeping the digital bog off the table. The terrible, possibly forged, documents disappeared from its luminous shiny surface.

“Eli Weissach thinks we’re only going to transfer the Palestinians to Jordan.”

“I know. The poor fool. It has not sunk into his skull how impractical mass forced deportations are. For decades, we have tried to make the Gazans’ lives miserable. They have not abandoned that shithole strip of land. Same with the un-citizen Arabs in the West Bank. No. There is only one path.”

“What about the Arab citizens of Israel?” Boaz asked, careful not to let his real horror show. Drach had ordered his brother David to kill Defense Minister Yossi. She would not hesitate to order Eli to make him disappear. “There are nearly two million, about twenty percent of the population.”

“They’ll be less than one percent after we’re done. During the European colonization of the Americas, ninety-five percent of the indigenous populations were wiped out by disease brought by Europeans. I hope to do much better.”

Drach waved her hand and brought up a demographic map of the region.

“Arabs don’t serve in the armed services, which is mandatory for Jews and Druze. As a result, they are not vaccinated against Khóshekh, our beautiful variation on the smallpox virus.”

Drach’s body language told him this meeting of the Daggers of Ehud was nearly at an end. The prime minister was wrapping things up.

“The survivors among Arab citizens of Israel will live out their days under close watch. But their children will not be Israelis. They will be deported to Jordan,” the prime minister said with finality and relish.

Boaz wanted to vomit. He tried to smile and hoped the sweat he felt on his brow would be taken as anticipation and excitement, not revulsion. He had

only a few more seconds to make his play.

“I share your vision,” he managed to say, and then set his trap. “But Eli may not. Most senior officers in the Shin Bet are loyal to him. He could cause problems if he stays in Israel.”

“You have an idea?”

It was Boaz and Rabbi Baumann’s contingency plan, if things ever got this far. They had not worked out any details of the “Andromeda plan” to counter Khóshekh. This was because there was one component they thought they could never get their hands on.

“I’ll need something, though. Something very sensitive. It has to be genuine or Eli will never believe it.”

“Tell me.”

“A man-portable nuclear device.”

Knowing a good bargain when she heard one, the PM smiled thinly.
“Done.”

11

KNESSET

BOAZ

Boaz left the prime minister's bunker. He would never have a better chance to kill Drach than the one he'd just walked away from. The genocidal madwoman was alive because he had faltered, because he was weak.

There were still options. His father had allies in the cabinet who opposed Drach. They could talk to certain members of the IDF about the possibility of a military coup. Then there was an alternative last-ditch scenario, the Andromeda plan. All these possibilities made his heart thunder in his chest.

He stepped off the elevator into the marble corridor of parliament, pausing to catch his breath. His legs felt like rubber. The Shin Bet bodyguards were gone. Boaz had a chance to speak to the rabbi in secret.

In his haste to get there, he narrowly avoided crashing into a secretary. As he muttered an apology, he started walking as fast as parliamentary decorum would allow to the one place he and his father could be assured of privacy. The informers and spies who infested the Knesset would not dare enter the religious section.

Rabbi Baumann was one of the two chief rabbis of Israel and the leader of the more influential North European Ashkenazi tradition. Over the past decade, his father had recognized the rise of the ultra-Orthodox as a political and social force in Israel. If Israel was to remain a Jewish state, he believed

its future would be religious, not secular. Unlike other countries, like France, which have an agnostic state and a tolerance of various religions, Baumann wrote extensively about the need for Israel to be first and foremost an ethnoreligious state with a tolerance for the secular.

And if the future were to be religious, Jews of all factions would have to get along. Rabbi Baumann had tried to integrate the Orthodox into general Jewish society by raising money for yeshiva schools and equal education facilities for women and girls. His partner, Sephardic Chief Rabbi Toledano, led the efforts to limit invasive DNA testing to prove Jewishness before approving marriages.

Their plans had backfired. Badly.

With increased funding, ultra-Orthodox Jews grew in numbers, not just from a very high birth rate—an average of eight children per couple—but also through Aliyah immigration and conversion. Many heeded the call to study Torah in the Holy Land as a profession. The tightly knit Orthodox communities were free from gambling, crime, and the increasing perversions and contradictions of hedonistic society. They were most definitely free of Arabs.

These things were attractive to many people. With greater numbers, the political influence of the Orthodox increased. They demanded and got a permanent cabinet position. The post of Religious Services Minister of Israel was now reserved for a chief rabbi. His father had to accept, fearing that one of the truly fanatical hardliners would be installed if he refused.

Boaz turned left, right, and right again. The air in the hall became less dry, almost humid. He ducked into the mikveh ritual bath facility.

Constructed of Herodian stone and polished marble, the section of the building set aside for purification was constructed according to exacting halachic standards and fed by living water. As required by Jewish religious laws, his father had overseen the mikveh facility's construction and its maintenance. There were no spy devices here.

Boaz quickly stepped out of his shoes. He found his father alone in an alcove. Boaz tilted his head. His father greeted him with a warm smile and a shrug.

“I guess there’s no better place to talk,” Boaz said.

“Not in Israel, not anymore.” The rabbi studied him. “Ach. I told you. Your brother had nothing to do with Yossi’s final act.”

Yossi had let the prime minister have the Khóshekh virus and had died shortly thereafter. Boaz and the others fighting the Daggers of Ehud thought there was only one explanation: David had tortured the old man into giving up the access codes before dispatching him. From what Drach had told him, why Yossi acted as he did was as much a mystery to her as to them.

“You should see the look of disappointment on your face which tells me that you found out David is innocent. He was tricked into acting as he did,” the rabbi said, with disapproval. Now was not the time for sibling rivalry. But Boaz could not bring himself to put any trust in his brother.

“Still, David killed your oldest friend.”

“He did. He did indeed, but only after a completely legal targeted assassination warrant was signed by the prime minister. Who knows what lies she told David.”

“So David was just following orders?” Boaz asked bitterly.

“Careful. He’s your brother.”

“Yossi was like yours.”

“He was killed by the people we are trying to stop: Drach and the Daggers.”

“If David did not torture Yossi before killing him, then why did Yossi release Khóshekh?”

Yossi had been their fail-safe. He was so deep in the Daggers that he had a veto on the release of the weapon. His argument for refusing to unlock it was that it had mutated beyond the protection given by the current vaccines.

“He shouldn’t have. In its mutated state, Khóshekh will kill not only Arabs

but thousands of Jews.”

“Tens of thousands, Father. Big Aleph has run projections.”

Just saying it aloud made Boaz realize Andromeda may be their only option. Would the rabbi understand?

“What else?”

There was nothing good to report. The prime minister had taken the Khóshekh virus to several undisclosed locations.

“Probably old bunkers from the early days of our nuclear weapons,” the rabbi said. “There are dozens of secret facilities all over that we used to hide atomic bombs from Russian and Egyptian spy planes.”

“I did get authorization for a Gamad-class tactical nuke,” Boaz said deliberately.

The rabbi was appalled. “Don’t even... Why did you do that?”

“It may be the only way.”

“We can’t use it to support a coup. Not even in these times. And we can’t destroy the Khóshekh weapon with a bomb.”

“Not while it’s spread out. But if it’s all in one place...”

“Tell her you’ve changed your mind. We can’t even have such a weapon.”

“I made up a convincing story about sending Eli away so he won’t interfere.”

“Then make up another. You seem to have become very good at deceit,” the rabbi said with displeasure.

“I’d rather have it and not need it than need it and not have it.”

“Ach, always with the clever answers,” his father said. “Subtle enough to be a rabbi but not ruthless enough to be a lawyer. Your ‘Andromeda plan’ should stay in the fantasy books where you found it.”

“It will, if you’re successful getting the other members of cabinet to turn against Drach.”

“I’m working on it. With Yossi dead, everyone’s afraid.”

“I’ll get her to deploy her entire stock of virus in Gaza,” said Boaz.

“Why would she?”

“Deniability,” Boaz said. “Drach intends to come out of this a national hero and international savior. The plan is to make it look like the Palestinian terrorists imported a bioweapon and it got loose by accident.”

“But we’ve sent the Americans samples of Khóshekh. They will know—”

“And what do you expect them to do? In a few weeks, all anyone will be thinking about is how to get the vaccine for their own populations. Drach will give it to them after they publicly agree to her version of events. The Palestinian Arabs will die, so will anyone who tries to expose her afterward. No one will risk a thing for the doomed Arabs.”

A moment of silence broken only by the trickling of water in the ritual bath house allowed the gravity of Drach’s sin to sink in.

“And the other reason she will target Gaza with the entire stockpile... is me,” Boaz continued. “She needs me. I was Yossi’s assistant for years. Drach just confirmed she trusts me more than her Shin Bet attack dog, Eli Weissach. She believes I am very loyal and very motivated. Out of personal hatred, I will insist we release the plague in the tunnels near Gaza City in order to kill the Arabs in Gaza first.”

“Unrelenting racial hatred to the rescue,” the rabbi said wearily. “The irony, huh, son? I want you to talk to David—”

“I won’t,” Boaz said harshly. “Even if he’s not working for the Daggers, we can’t take the risk.”

“You have to stop Khóshekh. If it means—”

“I better get to the airport,” Boaz said quickly, before the rabbi could say something wise about the importance of family. He checked the time.

“There’s a nuclear bomb in a carry-on bag waiting for me.”

12

TEL AVIV

DAVID

David was glad to be home. He looked forward to seeing his wife, Lia, and not thinking or talking about politics. As he stood in the hallway, he realized only one of those things was going to happen. From around the corner came the sounds of an energized conversation happening in the living room. It reminded him of *Eretz Nehederet*, Israel's *Daily Show*, but without the jokes.

"...and when the Army," Lia's voice said, "which is supposed to fight the enemies of the state of Israel, becomes the police, who will be there to protect and serve the people? How can you avoid a situation where the *people* end up being the enemies of the state?"

His wife was talking politics again. David cursed silently.

He noticed the two extra coats on the rack. Stephanie Abbad had just come back from America. Stephanie's fiancé was American; his family practiced a form of Orthodox Christianity. That was the least odd thing about the couple. David nearly felt like ducking out. He was hungry, though. Maybe the falafel place down the...

Khóshekh meowed at him.

"David, I almost didn't hear you come in."

He glared down at the ink-black Bombay cat.

"Just hanging up my jacket."

Their semi-detached house was narrow but had really high ceilings. Perfect for staying cool in the heat. As a result, their electric bill was low.

When he came into the living room, he was glad he'd stayed, as Lia had on that stunning blue wrap dress. The blazing dash of her tanned leg it revealed always made his heart skip a beat. Also, what they had cooking smelled a lot better than day-old falafels.

"Steph," he said, greeting their guests as he kissed his wife. "You're back. How was America?"

"The best," Stephanie said in a husky Palestinian accent. "I brought back a souvenir, no customs duty. My significant other: Spencer Livingston."

David took his guest's firm dry hand. Americans nearly always had a firm handshake; this thirtyish man from Utah was no exception.

Steph had on a yellow dress and wore more makeup. Aside from her broader shoulders and slightly darker skin, the Arab Muslim and Lia, who was Bedouin Christian, could be sisters.

Steph's long eyelashes fluttered, and it looked like she was about to start weeping. "America... it was so... so uncluttered," Steph said, very emotionally.

"Well, yeah, I guess," David said. "All of Israel is the size and population of New Jersey. You went to Utah to meet Spencer's parents, right?"

"It's not just the size," Steph said, thankfully putting any weeping on hold. "It's like all the time I was there I could breathe. I never once had to look over my shoulder for IDF patrols or remember to walk and act like a good Arab. I didn't have to choose a handbag which was obviously too small to hold a big knife."

"Now you're exaggerating," David said, smiling.

It put him a bit on edge when people complained about life in Israel. In all directions of the compass from Tel Aviv there were countries in which a charge of blasphemy could get you decapitated with a dull sword.

Steph held out her hand with two slim rings on it. "We got married right

there in Salt Lake City.”

“Congrats.”

“We can’t wait to go back to Utah. Permanently.”

“I’m glad there wasn’t any friction with Spencer’s family,” David said.

“They’re Mormon, right?”

“The Church of Latter-day Saints hates that name.”

“Sorry.”

“But since I married Stephanie,” Spencer said, taking his wife’s hand, “they hate me too. So what do I care what the darned Mormon Church thinks?”

“They don’t like Stephanie because she’s divorced?” David asked.

Steph blew a string of hair away from her face and said, “No, David, they don’t like Stephanie because Stephanie has a cock.”

“I didn’t know that had come up,” David said awkwardly. “I mean, ah, I’ll get more celery soda. You’re almost out.”

Lia followed him into the kitchen. David knew Stephanie was transsexual, but growing up in a rabbi’s house meant you did not ask people if they still had their penis.

“Sorry, did I say something dumb?”

“Forget it,” Lia said. “How was your day?”

I didn’t have to kill any cabinet ministers, David thought.

“Pretty good. The prime minister herself gave us a three-month vacation, paid.”

When they went back into the living room, Spencer was talking innocuously about the checkpoints Arabs like Stephanie had to endure.

“On the other hand,” David had to put in, “we’re the only country in the region that gives transgender people full rights. Even in the military.”

Stephanie rolled her eyes. “Now if we could only get the Orthodox gangs in Jerusalem to stop patrolling the streets looking to harass Jewish women dating Arab guys.”

“That sort of nonsense has never been official policy or law.”

“It kind of has,” Lia corrected him. “The Nation State Basic Law says communities can segregate housing, schools, roads, even drinking fountains on the basis of religious and ethnic affiliation.”

Oh boy. If there was an entry called “liberal Israeli” in the wikia, his wife’s picture would be in it.

“Israel has chosen security through apartheid,” Lia continued. “The country is completely segregated. We even have South African style Bantustan ghettos in the occupied West Bank. Only rich and privileged Palestinians can ever hope to escape. We, born Israeli citizens, we don’t notice it because we’re the ruling colonial class.”

David was almost at the eye-rolling stage. It had to have been at least a year since she had mentioned apartheid. If she escalated to calling the administration fascist, which she never had, he would probably have to excuse himself. He was tired of BDS lunatics shitting on Israel.

“Yes, Palestinians in the West Bank, I mean Judea and Samaria, do not vote for Knesset members,” David said, pitching his right-wing political party’s line. “But you can vote for your Palestinian Authority representatives.”

A whistling sound came from Stephanie’s mouth. It was hard to tell if it came through her teeth or her equally rigidly set lips.

“The PA ‘state’ has as much authority as a village council. Israel controls the territories from above, below, and both sides. We can vote and we can stick our fingers up our ass. Which do you think gives us the most pleasure?”

Again, David remembered he had to do something in the kitchen.

“Oh, David, I’m sorry,” Steph said apologetically. “Maybe it’s these new hormones, or being back here with Spencer. I’ll never be able to repay you for what you did, getting me out of my first marriage.”

When she was still forced to identify as a man and went by her birth name, Nassim, a local West Bank thug pressured Stephanie into an arranged

marriage with one of his Egyptian cousins. Under Israel's security laws, if an Israeli citizen married a noncitizen Palestinian, the spouse and children would never be Israeli citizens. However, the thug thought having Nassim/Stephanie in the family would make it easier to get visas for an ongoing smuggling business.

"That was nothing."

"Nothing to you. I know I was lucky getting out of that marriage to that girl without my legs broken or worse." Steph took Spencer's hands in hers. "We'll be grateful to you forever."

David and some Shin Bet heavies had scared Steph's enemies so badly, she never heard from her ex-in-laws again.

"You guys are moving to America," David said with forced optimism as he sat down on the couch. "One day we'll get this two-state solution thing worked out."

David thought it would help if the Palestinians would elect a leader whose first promise to his people was not to burn Israel to the ground, but he kept quiet.

Spencer raised a glass of wine. "Let's drink to that." Spencer refilled his glass eagerly.

When the second bottle was empty, their friends left.

"I thought Mormons didn't drink," David said as the door closed.

"Mormons are also discouraged from marrying transgender women," Lia said.

"In for a penny, I guess." David smiled meekly.

Lia was more relaxed, but he could not assume she was pliable, ever. That was one of the many reasons he had married her. That dress and those legs were two others.

"Now, if people with backgrounds that different can find harmony," David said, "there's got to be hope, right?"

Lia raised a skeptical eyebrow. "As long as you add in an American with a

valid passport and a fast-tracked visa application. What if Steph had stayed married to that woman? She was miserable living as a man.”

“She’d still be safer than in any other neighboring country. In the Islamic State, they’d already have beheaded and crucified her. Instead, thanks to your advice on makeup and clothes, she was probably the hottest lady they’d ever seen in Utah.” David had to add, “With or without a penis.”

Lia threw a small pillow at him. He dodged as gracefully as he could while carrying the dinner dishes. He almost dropped them. He really was tired.

“Look, just for tonight, can’t the house of David and Lia declare a cease-fire?”

Lia opened the patio door. Khóshekh padded outside.

Something was missing. He stared after the cat, unable to pinpoint what it was. Ever since he was a teen and had skipped yeshiva to go out smurfing for Israeli Army intelligence as a “bodel,” he had honed his senses to observe everything.

“Our house guest is missing something.”

Lia held up the cat’s collar bangle. “I was petting him and saw the locket had two small holes on the underside.”

David looked, was surprised and tried not to let it show in his voice as he said, “It’s a USB-G port.”

That sneaky old Yossi...

“Maybe I should have our tech guys deactivate it.”

Lia raised an eyebrow. “Well, this tech girl can tell you it’s completely unconnected. In fact, it’s insulated with rhodium, making it impervious to external sensors. I read what was on it.”

“Lia!”

“If you thought it was sensitive, you would have given it to someone at headquarters,” Lia said blithely.

“I just mean it might be a personal diary.” If it were a journal, David was thankful there was no way it could have recorded the last ten minutes of

Yossi's life. He and Lia never discussed his real work. David's cover job was as a citrus fruit expert in the Ministry of Agriculture.

Lia held the bauble. It was shaped like an Egyptian Eye of Horus:



“What was on it?”

“Only a four-dimensional algorithm. It uses three constants to plot the solution for the ‘w’ axis of the fourth.”

“Dear, I have Miss Aleph balance my checking account. What does that mean?”

“Not much. The inputs were blank. No idea what it could have been used for.”

“Yossi was a math professor before he became a politician. Maybe it was just some kind of doodling. Turn it in to your guys at IDF computing.”

“Didn’t we meet Yossi at your parents’ house?” Lia said.

“Could have. The rabbi, Yossi, Toledano, and Mrs. Stein have been inseparable for decades.”

“Until now.”

David nodded.

Lia hugged him. “At least Yossi had the comfort of you being there. Even though there was nothing you could do once his attack happened.”

“There was nothing at all to be done,” David agreed.

Lia’s mind was as fickle as it was keen. Moments later, she was staring at the company name on the empty pizza box.

“Wasn’t that the place they blew up last year?”

David thought back. “No, it was a different fast-food place. Some kid who worked in the kitchen tried to break the gas lines and cause an explosion. He ended up burning himself and the owner quite badly. Then he stabbed a

medic in the ambulance before they tied him down.”

She was thinking about something. “It’s... just, even Tel Aviv, it’s getting more claustrophobic. More violent. And with Stephanie moving to America...”

“Have I thought more about your idea of us leaving Israel?”

“Don’t let them wear you out. You’ve done your bit.”

He’d done more than Lia could ever know. But he could not leave Israel. Maybe this vacation would clear his head.

“Miss Aleph booked us a great deal to Havelock Island.”

“India? Really?” Lia said, her eyes lighting up. “We’ve been talking about that for ages but never had the time. I guess we can explore career options later?”

“Right now,” he said, pulling her toward him, “I’d like to explore the different ways that dress can come off. I see at least two or three.”

Lia grabbed his shoulders, and they kissed.

A flash of light from Miss Aleph made David’s eyes snap wide open. His shoulder muscles tightened.

“Message from the Emergency Operations Center, a Gemel security alert. Not a drill. Not a drill. Captain David Baumann report to Camp Rabin.”

13

GRAND HOTEL ANKARA, TURKEY

ELLIE

When Ellie Sato reported back to her *Citizen Juggernaut* editor in London, Smitty was floored. Really floored.

“An *exclusive* on Kurdistan independence and Mr. *Borkin* the oligarch billionaire?” Some of Smitty Heath’s words came out squeakily. She couldn’t tell if it was from excitement or pain.

Her boss’s personal video drone hovered above him as he lay on the carpet in mild agony. His half-moon spectacles had ridden up on his nose, and the tangled shock of long white hair around his bald spot looked like a halo.

“Are you sure about the *exclusive* window?”

“Very much so. Though my head start will be only twenty-three and a half hours. They think it’ll seem less suspicious to the other journalists whose visas are being delayed.”

Smitty made a sound like a young starling being choked, but it was clear he approved. “That’s nearly eighty-five thousand seconds of an advantage over the whole news cycle. You’ll be famous!”

Ellie was anxious. “I just want to get it right. Millions of Kurd people will be depending on me to represent their new nation to the world.”

“You’ll, *eeek*, do fine.”

Ellie absolutely did not want to tell Smitty about the concurrent spying gig she had agreed to. It would send him into paraxial spasms. In addition, they were probably watching her. The thought of that hunky American Atticus on the other side of a hidden camera was not all that unappealing.

“I know you have connections from Oxford,” Smitty said with irritating inquisitiveness. “You’re not doing anything unseemly, are you?”

“Who, me?” Ellie asked innocently. “The days of dropping your knickers and giving sexual favors for exclusives are quite over.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“No one wears knickers anymore. Bye, Smitty.”

The call ended with the older man’s lips frozen in a round O. She saved the image for future teasing.

On the table was a small package that had appeared in her room while she was in the restaurant. Inside was a gleaming black object. Micro-diamonds, deep inside the resin of the Celestial Night fountain pen, winked at her like chilled embers.

...

After freshening up, Ellie set about organizing the outfits and accessories that would best say “I am a journalist and not any sort of spy.”

Following seven wardrobe misfires, Ellie was ready and launched out of her hotel room. Then she realized she had forgotten the fob key to her door and had grabbed her empty purse by mistake.

Those mishaps corrected, she descended to the lobby. She wore owlsh Gucci sunglasses; like all of her most expensive clothes and accessories, she’d bagged them in an “after season” clearance sale. Under her arm was a copy of the *Citizen Juggernaut*, which had been freshly ironed by the robot concierge.

Kurdistan exclusive, diplomatic immunity...

She repeated her spy mantra and nearly ran into a granite pillar, one wearing a not-very-expensive gray-green suit and flashing a nice white

toothy smile.

She almost blurted out his real name.

“Oh, hi.” Ellie lowered her voice. “Do we have code names?”

He leaned down. “Do you want a code name?”

“Hello, Ms. Sato,” the concierge said as they passed the front desk.

Ellie shrugged. “No code names, then.”

“Boris Borkin’s people have called your office, which is really our office,” Atticus said. “They’ve sent a car for you.”

“How nice.”

“It’s not that nice.” Mild concern flashed across the soldier’s handsome features. “Means you’ll be on your own. We won’t have people inside the factory gates.”

“I’m sure you have a plan for that.”

Oh, please have a plan for that.

“We do. We’ll have to hang back until you come out of Borkin’s industrial complex.”

At the hotel’s entrance, they passed the huge revolving doors. They looked like they could fit twenty people through at a time.

On the street, a man with skin the color and texture of a fifty-year-old tar roof was playing an accordion. Badly. Beside him, a monkey pranced adorably with a cup.

Atticus took something out of his ear and stuck it the tin cup held out by a tiny hairy hand. She’d seen spy movies; that must be his communications device. The accordion’s simian assistant must be an accomplice!

“Now listen,” Atticus said, coming comfortably close to her. “I didn’t approve of getting you involved.”

“I thought soldiers were always supposed to follow orders?”

“Only when they’re in line with the honor code. Are you really sure you want to go through with this?”

“As long as no one ends up serving life in a salt mine, what the hey,

right?”

“I can say you dropped the item and I accidentally stepped on it,” he said, looking at the pen case which made her purse bulge out. “They only have one.”

Ellie felt that this was as warm and fuzzy as anyone ever got in the spy world. She was flattered. She was also resolute.

“I’m no blushing violet. I broke the UK rosacea cream scandal two years ago. It was brought up in parliament. I can do this. I want to do this.”

Atticus retrieved his earpiece. The monkey tipped his bellhop hat to the big American.

“Now reject me.”

“Huh?”

“They’re early. Right behind me. I need you to firmly reject my improper advances.”

Behind Atticus was a long limousine in a no-stopping zone. No one was bothering to tell it to move. Big Bad Boris Borkin’s people. Right.

“Gerroff!” Ellie said, loudly backing away. “And if that’s the kind of smutty acting you’re looking for, hire yourself a... Turkish geisha belly dancer. Good day!”

Ellie had barely extricated herself from that pretend masher Atticus when two gents with hideously unfashionable eyeglasses approached.

“Miss Sato, we take you to Mr. Borkin’s factory, yes?”

Once she was inside the car, she saw little images flickering on the insides of their black ebonite-framed eyewear. A miniature picture of her, and not a very good one.

“Please be comfortable and relax,” said the stoic man in the seat opposite.

She decided to play it cool and pretend to enjoy the limo’s built-in foot massager and minibar. Twenty minutes later, they came to the entrance of a big factory.

Borkin Üretim Pazarlama San. ve Tic. A.Ş.

A soot-stained sign hung from the gates leading to a series of ugly cinderblock buildings. Smokestacks spewed toxic fumes. Thousands of tires were strewn around. Sulfur smells penetrated the closed space of the limo.

The walkway to the building was being swept by robotic and human caretakers. Both types looked dusty and beleaguered. Keeping the place free of soot must be a round-the-clock effort.

Before she went through the front doors, Ellie snuck a look back up the drive. If Atticus was shadowing her, he was keeping a low profile. There was no one in sight.

As the outside door closed, she found herself encapsulated in an oval virtual-reality suite. The walls, the floor, and the ceiling were all high-resolution display screens. The 3-D effect was the point of view of someone speeding along a twelve-kilometer zip line down from Mount Ararat.

As she walked forward, seemingly on thin air, she concentrated on keeping her balance.

Spies don't pratfall.

Curved doors parted. A tiny, perky girl in a brightly colored head scarf greeted her. A few years ago in Turkey, women who covered their heads were banned from universities. The fundamentalist pendulum had certainly swung round. Boris Borkin, the canny survivor, was swinging with it.

"Welcome to Borkin Manufacturing and Sales," she said. "I'm Zehra, and I'll be your concierge to ensure you have a pleasant and productive stay."

"That's brilliant." *A pipsqueak shadow.*

"Would you please entrust us with your recorders and electronic devices?"

Ellie had a feeling the final doors leading into the complex would not open unless she did that.

"There you go," Ellie said, smiling politely. "I'll just hang on to my notepad, and my pens."

Neither Mr. Borkin nor his office was as large as anticipated. He was, however, quite unassuming and charming. He came to the other side of his

desk to greet her. His head was round and had a nearly symmetrical growth of stubble from his chin to the back of his head. His wrists and neck were twice the girth of an average man.

“Ms. Sato from the media in London?”

“*Citizen Juggernaut*,” Ellie said, rotating her shoulders smartly to show her prop copy tucked under her arm. “We print on paper with real ink. Which I see you appreciate.”

On the shelves behind him were about five hundred fountain pens and dozens of ink jars. Fortunately, she spied the white finial cap of his Montblanc on his desk. The target of her caper.

“A small hobby,” he said almost sheepishly. “I spend so much time here I moved my collection out of the house. To the great relief of my dear wife.”

The pictures of Borkin’s wife and teenage children were the only other things on his desk. She was a dour, stout woman, definitely Turkish. Ellie remembered Borkin had arrived quite poor and had married into a family related to the Ottoman sultans of old. They had land but only a tatty crop of fig trees on them. Soon the fig trees were strip-mined away, and two decades later, Mr. Borkin was the country’s leading oligarch.

“A little elegance is worth the effort, don’t you think?” Ellie said, sitting in the ornately gilded chair her host pulled out. “In a few years, we’ll look back with fondness on the days of display screens and electrons. Lichtwerks in Germany has announced plans for an injectable cellular phone.”

Borkin chuckled. “Dr. Wolfgang Licht, that poser. I keep meeting him at Davos. I tease him: ‘Without my diamond nano string, your space elevator is just a balloon, lost in the sky.’”

“I’ve seen a demonstration in your lobby,” Ellie said. “That wonderful mountain zip line.”

“It’s by far the longest one on Earth. Over twelve kilometers long, and the core cable is as thin as a human hair.”

Ellie blathered something about opening a window into Turkey for British

readers.

“Perhaps,” Ellie said, sitting on the edge of her seat to be closer to the desk, “we could start with your nanotech space-elevator material.”

Borkin was skeptical about her expertise. Ellie knew she should have worn fashion glasses to make her look smarter.

“Are you familiar with nanotech?”

“Why... yes. In fact, I can tell you Chanel’s summer clothing line will be entirely coated in carbon nanotubes based on the Penrose equation, which expands and contracts with temperature changes to keep the wearer at the perfect temperature.”

That seemed to assure Borkin that she was more than a pretty Eurasian face.

Ellie was less concerned with breaking news than breaking the man’s grip on the Montblanc pen she had to swap out. He was holding it like a baton in his fist. Fortunately she had glanced at a few wikis in the limousine. She could fake an interview.

“How did a company known for mining boron and cobalt get into materials science, a field dominated by Germany and the Far East?”

Borkin was enthused, proving that it was true: talk to someone about themselves and they will listen for hours.

A few minutes later, despite her secret spy mission, Ellie was bored. Borkin had brought out little models of molecules. He looked like a big fat preschooler with a LEGO set.

“...hence, one pair of electrons is shared between two atoms. Now, consider total forces acting within the molecule formed...”

He droned on. She pretended to scratch fake shorthand notes.

“...in the case of diamond, it’s a 3-D covalent solid, which possesses a tetrahedral shape...”

Her ears perked up when he mentioned diamonds.

“But Mr. Borkin, diamonds are hard crystals. How can they be rigid and

flexible at the same time as in your space lasso, which is supposed to reach up a zillion miles?”

Borkin smiled. “Maybe not a zillion, but certainly tens of thousands of kilometers.”

That was all she needed to fill out a 2,000-word story, which would probably get cut down to five hundred. She still needed an opportunity to steal Borkin’s pen.

“What about the argument that a space elevator will just make militarization of space that much easier?” she asked. “Such a device would be able to carry more tonnage into orbit in a year than has been accomplished over the whole history of rocket space flight.”

“I can see you’ve done your homework.”

He ushered her over to the window. Huge panes of glass faced a deep pit with a dull fire glowing in its center.

“I built my headquarters right over the old foundry and smelting pits,” Borkin said as they peered down into a crevasse.

“Something’s glowing down there.”

“The legacy smelter. We keep it lit day and night to remind the PhD graduates working above where they came from.”

It did look like a pit Borkin could threaten to throw people into.

Ellie launched a few more softball questions. The interview was winding down. The Celestial Night pen was only a foot away on Borkin’s desk.

“I will have my press secretary contact you with photographs or any other fact-checking details,” Borkin said as he stared at her bosom. “Is that a Namiki Emperor Limited Edition?”

Correction: as he stared at her most valuable pen.

“Yes, it was a gift.”

“They rarely sell those, and almost never to foreigners. May I?”

She handed it to him. And since he was fondling hers...

“What a coincidence,” Ellie said in her best surprised voice. “I have a

Celestial Night as well.”

She grabbed his stylus with one hand and opened her pen case with the other. She had practiced this several times in the hotel, but her hands were shaking ever so much more now.

“Yoshida-san made this pen,” Borkin said, recognizing the signature on the end cap of the Namiki. “It must have a hundred coats of lacquer.”

“Closer to three hundred. It took nearly three years to make.”

Borkin shot a glance at her as she held the two Celestial Nights up together. “Don’t get them confused, huh? Otherwise I’ll have to send someone to your hotel before you leave.”

It was a little creepy dealing with people who employed thugs.

“No chance of that. I’ve left my nib-size sticker on.” Ellie showed him his own pen, which she’d affixed an “M” for medium sticker to. “It increases the resale value.”

Having switched the “M” sticker to Borkin’s pen, she set the decoy pen Atticus had given her right in the middle of his desk. She felt ever so sneaky.

“Now, Ms. Sato, may I make you a proposal?”

“By all means.”

“I have a small apartment in St. James, London,” Borkin said, wearing that calculating face powerful men get when weighing a deal.

Maybe this is my moral dilemma. Billionaire wants me to be his kept harlot. Pathetic, ridiculous. Of course, it couldn’t hurt to hear him out.

“It’s nothing much, only four bedrooms. I acquired the apartment from a gambler who owed me money. He was very motivated to settle his debt. I would like to own this Namiki and would be willing to offer a straight trade.”

The Namiki was unique. A parting gift when she left her job at *Asahi Shimbun*. She had cleared the editor’s name after a child prostitution ring tried to blackmail him with fake pictures. As a piece of art, the pen was valuable. The artisan had been named a national living treasure by the Emperor. By trading it she could jump quite a few rungs up on London’s

“property ladder.” Her current standing was on rung zero.

Yet to Ellie, the Namiki fountain pen was also priceless.

“Mr. Borkin, you have a lot of pens. I’m sure each has a story,” Ellie said, taking the Namiki back and putting it in her pen case beside the stolen Montblanc. “This one reminds me of the time I saved the reputation of a most honorable man, my first boss. It’s part of my story. I’m sorry, I can’t part with it.”

Of course, if you threw in a flying Bentley volocopter...

“I understand,” Borkin said sincerely. “Will you at least allow me to make a holographic copy of it?”

“Oh, go ahead, I’ve got scads of time,” she said.

Ellie was quite relaxed now. She gazed out the big, broad window over the smelter pit of doom. Maybe espionage was not all that hard. She could take it up as a hobby, as long as it involved working with Captain Atticus...

Now, who’s that?

On the other side of the office, Mr. Borkin was working his holographic scanner, which was shining laser whatnots over the Namiki. Ellie had drifted over to the bay windows. An oddly dressed window washer appeared, hanging upside down.

Maybe it was Atticus or one of his spies watching out for her. With the black balaclava mask on, she could not tell who it was. The man attached a series of suction cups to the glass.

“Uh, Mr. Borkin, would you have a look—”

The rest of her words, and any reply from the oligarch standing on the other side of the room, were cut off by an ear-splitting shrieking noise.

The suction cups deployed some kind of flaming acid on the bulletproof glass. Fist-sized holes were melted in it. Claw like grapples like metal fingers inserted themselves into the melted holes. Attached to those by cables were rocket pods. They ignited and ripped out the whole twelve-foot pane of glass. Where the window had been a second ago, a big hole gaped.

Ellie stumbled backward and grabbed the leg of a desk to avoid being sucked out behind the window frame. Pens and papers flew everywhere.

Then bullets started flying. All of them were coming from behind her, where Mr. Borkin was. Pressing herself to the floor, she glanced back.

Mr. Borkin, nerdy pen collector, had grabbed some kind of machine gun with two huge round magazines dangling from either side. He was wild-eyed, grimacing, and practically frothing at the mouth as he sprayed bullets.

She thought about crawling for the door. As soon as she put her hand down, a hot shell casing burned her palm. Her yelp of pain came out soundlessly in the deafening racket. Ellie rolled to a corner and covered her ears.

14

HAGANA ROAD TEL AVIV

DAVID

David glared at Miss Aleph, but she kept on nagging him with the IDF alert. Of all the damn times.

This type of alert was issued over IDF channels and social media when they did not know what alert to issue. Maybe it was a really large flotilla of helium-filled condom balloons from Gaza. Maybe Iran had smuggled a Meshkat stealth cruise missile into Syria for a live-fire test on their favorite target.

“I’ll probably get turned back before I get to headquarters,” David had told Lia as he left their house.

A few blocks later, his car slowed by itself. The dash screen jittered. A jumble of shapes flashed across it, then it switched off.

“Sorry, Dave, GPS is not working properly,” Miss Aleph said from the speakers on her handset. “I can use optical sensors to keep driving.”

“I’ll do it.”

Dave took the wheel. This time of night, traffic was light. The technical glitch did not improve David’s mood.

Over the last four days, he had been under pressure preparing for Yossi’s targeted killing. In some ways it was the easiest assassination he had ever been involved in. All he had to do was give it the appearance of death by

natural cause. Prime Minister Drach's people had taken care of the CCTV, sensor logs, the Shin Bet bodyguards, and the coroner's inquest.

They could have sent in a Shin Bet or Mossad team. But Drach, bless her, had taken time out of her busy schedule keeping Israel safe and prosperous. She had personally showed him the cave under the Israel-Gaza, where Yossi's killers had carried out the heinous crimes in the name of the Daggers of Ehud. In return, David had made sure an Israeli war hero and a celebrated patriot did not lose his reputation after he had forfeited his life.

David drove toward Camp Rabin. Vague notions of security of the state were on his mind when *wunk*, something hit his car's windshield.

He slowed and looked. There was a smear on the glass. He jammed on the brake.

"Dave, an object has struck the car."

"Thank you, Miss Aleph. The human will take it from here."

It was a bird. Or rather, three quarters of one. Not a small buzzard, either. The impact had broken its neck. The bulk of the bird—head, body, and one wing—lay near the traffic divider.

Out of the dark evening sky came a flutter of motion that made him crouch. His hand drifted toward his weapon. He stopped.

Making a gyrating, looping spire down through the air, as though trying to fly on its own, the other wing of the carrion bird fell to the pavement.

"It's a griffon vulture, Dave." Miss Aleph was using the car's 360-degree cameras and sensors to check for threats.

"It's dead."

How had it died? The cut on the main part of the bird was still oozing blood through its brown and white features. It was clean, as though made by a scalpel.

A jet thundered overhead, on its way to Ben Gurion Airport.

He kicked the carcass to the side of the road. The robot street sweepers would get it. He looked at a dodgy noodle restaurant across the street.

If the local chefs don't grab it first, he mused.

“Major Baumann!”

A gangly kid riding a bike with five inline wheels skidded to a dramatic stop just in front of his headlights. “Headquarters sent me to find you, Major.”

David was unimpressed. “I bet you’ve been waiting months to say that.”

“A year and a half,” the sixteen-year-old boy said. “They never let me do anything cool, until tonight.”

The kid was a bodel for Army Intelligence. For some reason, tonight they had him delivering messages on a bike.

“Hey, Eitan, how did you find me?”

The boy pointed to a big square food delivery box on his back. He had kept his night job; smart kid.

“They told me you had left your house and were coming to headquarters but to see if I could tell you to go to the airport instead.”

“You don’t know where I live.”

“One time you gave me a pack of matches from AM:PM to light some fireworks.”

Eitan the junior spy. “Not conclusive. AM:PMs are all over Tel Aviv,” David said, amused.

“You had a drink in your cup holder, it had a coupon stamp from the one on Perets Street. Since you work odd hours, I figured you would stop close by where you live.”

“And Hagana is the street I would most likely take driving to Camp Rabin.” The kid was a real Hercule Poirot. “Okay. I got the message. Get going. People don’t tip for cold deliveries.”

Eitan stared at the red stain on the windshield. “Did I interrupt you?”

“Miss Aleph, do something useful. Make the car clean that off.”

“I tried, Dave. We’re having some communication issues.”

Eitan put down the centipede bike. Five glowing neon wheels that could ride up and over nearly anything spun around like floating roulette wheels.

“That was the other thing, Major,” he said, coming close. “There’s

something going on.”

“If there was, it would be in the *Post* before you bodels heard about it.”

“Really,” Eitan said insistently. “One of the top communications jockeys asked me something about packet switching, which I might know a bit about from my experience gaming.”

“Are you angling for a raise?”

“That’s why they sent me,” the teen delivery boy said, trying to be serious. The kid’s mop of curly hair, pimples, and the smell of onions coming from his pack were having the opposite effect. “The whole network’s having problems.”

“There are a dozen redundant systems.”

“Right, sir, but all communication is... physical.”

“Huh?”

Eitan was reminding David of Lia when she talked technical.

“All waves, square, sinusoidal periodic, from the shortest gamma ray to the longest radio wave a hundred kilometers long, are all waveforms.”

“Kid, it’s late, and—”

“They’re all being interfered with somehow,” Eitan said, excited enough to interrupt him. “Most military jamming is broad-spectrum or frequency-specific. This is different. Major Baumann, I don’t think the IDF has reliable comms. With anyone or anything.”

Maybe Big Aleph was finally having a cyber tantrum.

“Okay, Eitan. Go back and tell them you found me and—”

Just then, not far from where David and Eitan stood, another wing fell to the ground. Only this one had a jet engine attached to it.

David grabbed Eitan and pushed him down behind cover. Deadly shrapnel could fly out from a blast for many seconds after an impact. Every Israeli schoolchild was taught that.

After the hellacious metal-shearing, cinder-block-crunching impact, nothing. There was only a quiet cloud of dust rolling across the street half a

block away. David hauled Eitan up. After the impact of the plane wing, the street was oddly quiet. There should be sirens.

“I’m going to the airport. You are going home.”

“I should go with you,” Eitan said, dusting himself off. “You may need backup. Or I could go back to Camp Rabin.”

Sophisticated all-wave communications interference, and now the crash of a medium-sized jet. The damned thing had its wing torn off in midair. David’s mind raced through possibilities. He knew weapons developers were working on a dark-energy electromagnetic pulse weapon that did not need a megaton explosion to black out a continent. However, the lights of Tel Aviv remained on.

“No. Do not go back to the base. I need you to deliver something.” Eitan’s family lived in Brussels. He was sixteen, a hapless gofer and too enthusiastic for his own good. “You’re going to my house.”

“But—”

“See this?” David turned his forearm over to reveal a rather un-halachic tattoo.

✕0✕

“I’m a major in Unit 101. I can dislocate your four largest joints without breaking a sweat. What you gonna do?”

“What you tell me?”

Right answer.

“Take this,” David said, thinking fast and handing him something. He had to make the story sound good, otherwise Eitan would suspect his real purpose was to keep him out of the action. Action which had just turned deadly.

The Yom Kippur War started just like this. With a “bushwhacking,” as Americans say.

The kid looked at the object skeptically. “A tiny locket on a chain?”

“Look closer. It’s a micro-shielded USB. It belongs to a deep-cover operative named Khóshekh. He’s at my house lying low. Give it to my wife,

Lia. Stay with her until I come back. If you let any harm come to either of them...”

“I know, you’ll jellyfish me.”

“*Sababa.*”

He slapped the moonlighting bike delivery boy on the back of his big square backpack. Eitan pedaled off and cheekily called back, “You know your ’101’ tattoo is not right. There’s no Hebrew digit for zero.”

David shook his head, smiling, and returned to his car. A moment later he heard a siren, finally. There was only one, and it was moving away. The plane-wing wreckage was still smoking but had not set the mini mall down the street on fire. There was no one in the rubble yelling for help. He had to go.

A part of David wanted to pretend he had not received the message to report. He wanted to dash back home to Lia. Instead he raced to the airport. Israel was under attack.

15

HAGANA ROAD TEL AVIV

LIA

The door clicked shut behind David. Lia sighed.

He had to get paged just when Steph and Spencer had gone back to their hotel. It was also one of the few waking hours she was not getting texts from her programming team.

Which, come to think of it, was odd. Lia checked her inbox. Nothing had come in during the past few hours, not even spam. Her programming team at the IDF usually got their second wind in the evenings, after filling up with junk food and fizzy caffeine drinks.

David had not closed the closet door. Lia checked it over to see if he had forgotten anything. Inside was an old rechargeable vacuum; new tins of cat food which a pet store delivery robot had brought earlier in the day; her ballistic vest; and her assault rifle, which was the latest model.

Lia slumped on the couch.

Sharing him with the IDF was like some kind of bizarre shared marriage. There were so many things she knew not to ask. Maybe Steph had the right idea. Get away from Israel, the IDF, the occupation, the stress that silently strangled everything.

It didn't have to be permanent, but how great would it feel for them just to

get out for a while, together? She'd requested some online contract job applications. David hadn't said anything, but she could tell things were getting him down. Many of his preoccupations were things he could not share. Lia had no idea whether that helped or hurt.

"Don't you think that's a plan, Khóshekh?"

The strange cat stared at her. Without the locket, his neck seemed bare. David had it in his pocket, the one shaped like an Egyptian Eye of Horus. The fact it was a data device was a little odd. Of course, the whole thing with David being right there when Yossi had his fatal attack was a little unsettling.

The doorbell rang.

Lia glanced at the fat cushions on the sofa. Maybe Steph had dropped some jewelry. Her new hormone treatments had made her a bit skittish.

"Hang on!"

The main home screen remained blank. The motion detector was supposed to kick in and show who was at the door. Through the peephole she saw a skinny guy in a delivery outfit. He was accompanied by the smell of onions and garlic.

"Have you got the right house?"

"Major Baumann sent me, Mrs. Baumann," the guy said. He looked nervous but not in a home-invasion sort of way. "I'm Eitan."

"What is it? What's wrong?" Lia's heart thumped in her chest. She whipped open the bulletproof door, forgetting all protocol. The big square backpack could be a bomb.

"There's been trouble," the kid said and thankfully did not explode himself. "At the airport. A plane is down."

What the heck would David have to do with the airport? Eitan stood there nervously.

"Can I come in?"

Lia let him in and told the TV to switch itself on. It did not. She had to hit the power-on button on the smart home control panel in the hall. The video

reporting the crash seemed to be from a handheld at street level. Smoke rose from blocks away. The sound was garbled and from another channel.

“Eitan, come in.” She locked the door after him.

Jittery hands thrust something at her. Lia took a step back before she recognized the object. Khóshekh’s pendant.

“The major told me to give you this and stay here with you and agent Khóshekh until he came back.”

Agent Khóshekh?

“Is David okay? What were you doing there?”

“I was ordered to find him. And I managed to catch up to him. He was with a dead bird, on Hagana, then the plane crashed. I mean, I didn’t see the plane, only the wing. But without the wing...”

“Huh?” This spew of information left Lia even more confused.

Lia checked her handset again. No new messages. The last one was a spam job application from Worldwide Help International: “*Help us change the world as a security contractor.*”

The video screen in the hallway switched to an announcer. His lips moved silently. Only static rising and falling and squalling came from the speakers as he spoke.

The screen cut out. The Civil Defense logo appeared with something written over it.

אדום

Red.

There was another word, but it was cut off. Then the screen went completely dead.

Eitan watched with rising horror playing over his face. A plane stripping its wings had not terrified him as much as the thought of being without an electronic connection to reality.

“Double crap! What do we do, Mrs. Baumann?”

A furious knocking came from the door.

This time Lia went to the closet and grabbed the fully accessorized assault rifle. When she saw who was there, she slumped with relief and hid it behind a planter.

“What are you two doing back here?” Lia said, trying to keep anxiety out of her voice.

It was a useless attempt. Whatever Steph and Spencer had already experienced had left them disoriented and disheveled. The cab that brought them took off down the street. The lights along the avenue flickered in a way Lia had never seen before.

“Something was going on at the airport, near the hotel,” Spencer said. “There were sirens and fire trucks. We went down, and there was no one at the front desk.”

“I told you not to book the cheapest place.”

“We figured we better come back here. Hope that’s okay.”

Lia let them in. She looked up and down the now-empty street and bolted the door.

“At least we won’t starve,” Steph said, grabbing a couple slices of cheese-laden pizza from the open delivery knapsack in the living room. “How much do we owe you?”

Eitan shrugged. “During rocket alerts, it’s on the house.”

Lia barely heard them. This was no average rocket attack. For one thing, this was Tel Aviv, not Sderot. Only cruise or ballistic missiles would reach them. For another, the weirdly cut-off civil alert on the TV. “Red.”

“What?”

In addition to being employed by the IDF as a programmer, Lia was a neighborhood Home Front security officer. She knew about the highest level of civil defense emergency called Red Dawn. It could not be that, that was only supposed to go into effect when there was the threat of an imminent invasion on the scale of the 1973 Yom Kippur War.

That would be crazy. Full-on Red Dawn would mean a vast uprising or

invasion. An intifada on steroids. It had to be a glitch. There would have been some kind of warning, wouldn't there?

Spencer looked out the shuttered window.

"There was an air-raid alert?"

Lia realized Westerners got really freaked out by the thought of metal-filled explosives dropping from the sky without warning. The rest of the world had learned to deal.

"It's probably nothing," Lia said.

David would know. She ducked into the kitchen and tried to dial. Before it could connect, the signal dropped to zero. She tried again. A third time. Nothing.

"Hey, is there any sauce?" Spencer asked. "I like cheese, but this is like a mozzarella fandango going on here, man."

Eitan rummaged in his big pannier bag. "Like this?"

"Ketchup? Uh, thanks."

"We'll be here a while," Steph said, taking charge of the culinary front. "Lia and I will make some marinara sauce."

"Let me check if I've got everything," Lia said distractedly. She gave a sideways glance to her handset and then talked to the fridge. "Marinara sauce. Have you got everything?"

The fridge mechBrain thought for a second.

"Yes, but you are low on olive oil. I will add it to the weekly list."

The front panels of cupboards and drawers where the ingredients were located became transparent and lit up.

"Wow," Steph said. "Marrying into the ruling class has its perks."

She saw Lia biting her lip. "Sorry, I didn't mean anything by that."

"No, it's just... David was called away suddenly."

"You think it has something to do with the air raid?"

"I don't—"

Her handset rang. It was a strange caller ID.

Public Phone, Canada House Community Center, Jerusalem

A pay phone—did those still exist? Jerusalem?

“Allo?” The voice was faint and filled with static. Lia recognized him instantly.

“Father?”

“Lia—*hrrzzk*—burning. Not safe... let you know we’re at Can... House Community Center.”

“Where?”

“Center on Daniel Street.”

“Are you all right?”

“We’ll... fine, don’t...”

Then the line cut out. It was a pay phone, there was no use trying to redial. She did anyway. Nothing. Not even a busy signal.

Everyone was looking at her. Steph and Eitan understood Arabic, but Spencer recognized the international language of thinly disguised panic. He sat frozen on the couch, some grease politely dribbling down his chin.

Lia thought quickly. Her parents lived in Musrara, outside the Old City of Jerusalem. It was normally a quiet community. They had sold their business and bought a courtyard house that had been built in the 1800s when the city was still controlled by the Ottoman Turks.

Their house was, in theory, defensible against the average street riot. If they had left it, things must be bad. The Canada House Community Center was their neighborhood civil-defense center and bomb shelter.

“You guys,” Lia said. “You can stay here. I’ve got to go.”

Lia grabbed her IDF reservist pack from the closet and her assault rifle.

“W-where you goin’?” Spencer asked.

“Jerusalem. You guys stay—”

“Like heck!” Steph said.

Eitan stood up and grabbed his fanny pack. “We’re going too.”

Lia did not have time to argue.

“House, lock up. Lia’s car, ignition on. Calculate best route and time to

destination: Jerusalem.”

16

BEN GURION AIRPORT TEL AVIV

DAVID

David drove past the spot on Hagana Road where plane parts had crashed. He slowed. A lone emergency crew had arrived; their fire engine was behaving strangely. Its lights and sirens were going on and off. Firefighters were having trouble getting the hoses to unspool. There were no apparent victims inside the shops this late at night.

Down the block, some people from a twenty-four-hour diner had come out. Some of them were armed reservists. There was nothing for David to do there. He had to obey the instructions Eitan had relayed.

“Miss Aleph, what’s going on?”

“Secure military channels are slow. Only the highest priority messages with high incidents of repetition are arriving uncorrupted.”

His personal AI was starting to sound like the geek Eitan.

“Do I have to talk to your big brother?”

“Dave, please do not devalue my contributions because I am a portable machine mind.”

If it was some kind of system-wide cyber infection, he did not want to lose Miss Aleph.

“Quarantine yourself.”

“Already did,” she said. “Best hypothesis is the military systems are being jammed. The jamming includes malware snippets.

“As Big Aleph tries to stitch together bits of messages from frequency-hopping ‘unjammable’

satellites, pieces of malware similar to the Stuxnet virus are being inserted and activated.”

“What about civilian channels?”

“They’re having the opposite problem,” Miss Aleph said. “Too much information. Each message is being repeated several million times per second and altered in the process.

“For example, news posts variously report an explosion, a cargo plane crash, a terrorist bomb, and excessive fireworks near Ben Gurion Airport. Casualty figures reported range from zero to six hundred.”

The ultimate tsunami of fake digital news.

“I guess we’ll have to use our eyes.” David drove on.

The military expansion runways of Ben Gurion Airport were on the south side. The main wreckage of the plane was about a kilometer away. David hoped it had only been a cargo plane. There was not much left.

David approached the heavily fortified gates of the military control tower. Security had been bolstered with a few tanks and a cordon of armored cars that looked like oblong black beetles. That was a relief. Someone was on the ball.

“Stay there!” a loudspeaker blurted.

David got out, holding his ID high. The guards would be jumpy. If they demanded he get on his knees, he would be very annoyed. Instead, out from between the dragon’s teeth, zigzagging up to the main gate, he saw his brother Boaz. Boaz Baumann was actually jogging. He’d never seen him run, except in high school when he was getting his glasses knocked off during dodgeball. Two serious-looking Army goons carrying heavy weapons trotted beside him.

“Hey, what a surprise—”

“David, no time,” Boaz said. He used his own handset to remotely switch off Miss Aleph.

“Dave, my mind is going. . .”

“What did you do that for?”

“There’s a complete ground stop. Nothing’s flying out of Ben Gurion tonight,” Boaz said, sounding stressed. “I have to drive to where I need to go. You’re coming with us.”

What could David say?

“Yes, Mr. Acting Minister of Defense.”

His sarcasm was punctuated by the last sound you ever wanted to hear near a civilian airport: the rattle of an electric Gatling gun. Tracer rounds shot into the sky, then stopped. It was the last line of the Iron Dome’s defense against missiles and rockets. What could have set it—

Suddenly their shadows ghosted out in front of them, a hundred feet long. Before David could think, a blast of heat pricked, flared, and burned the back of his head. He felt a scorching heatwave on his shoulders and legs right through his clothes.

Fireball flash! An atomic? A blast wave had to be incoming.

He and Boaz managed to get behind the car just as an overpressure wave thundered over and through them.

Coughing through clouds of dust, David looked up. The two Army guards were lying at opposite ends of the roadside ditch, not moving.

The control tower was gone, replaced by a small rising mushroom cloud that cooled, formed writhing black embers, and merged with the night sky. David tried to breathe through choking gusts of dust that spewed from across the runway.

Get in! David yelled. He could not hear his own words. His ears were not working right.

He grabbed Boaz and propelled him through the car’s open door. Filth plastered the windows; it was like diving into a bomb shelter. His ears popped.

“Miss Aleph, wake up. Fast boot, now.”

She snapped awake.

“Radiation reading, quickly.”

“Background normal.”

“Not a nuke.”

“Optical and thermal cameras from the area did register a double flash.”

“So it *was* a nuke.” David held the handset tightly, as if he was going to

strangle Miss Aleph if she did not give him a straight answer. “A small tactical one, like the American Davy Crockett?”

“Not without the radiation I’m not detecting.”

“Then what?” Boaz said way too loudly. His brother’s ears also were not right. The real question was who?

David thought quickly. Something had come into the defensive perimeter around the airport. Something airborne. The Iron Dome antimissile defense had tried to shoot it down but missed. The mystery weapon hit its intended target: the IDF control tower.

David wrenched himself up in the driver’s seat. There was a small patch of clear in the cracked windshield, enough to steer by.

He floored the accelerator. Primary and backup engines both responded. Gravel skidded under the tires. David’s singed clothes and possibly blistering skin of his back pressed into his seat as they sped down the access road, away from the crippled airport.

Boaz did not say anything. He usually was full of answers. Either he did not know, or he knew and could not say.

“David, we have to get out into the Negev.”

“Standard procedure is to get you to Camp Rabin, into one of the bunkers.”

“Screw standard procedure! I need to get to... here.”

Boaz whipped out a glowing scroll filament with map coordinates on it. There was nothing there, just a patch of gray near the city of Be’er Sheva.

“You realize we’re in a state of emergency and possibly all-out war, right? Mr. Acting Minister of Defense?”

“That’s why we’re going. I have to deploy Israel’s nuclear weapons.”

17

MR. BORKIN'S FACTORY TURKEY

ELLIE

The gunfire in Mr. Borkin's office slowed down. Ellie was not naïve enough to think that was a good thing. It might just mean the shooters were looking for things to shoot at.

She tried to make herself as small a target as possible behind a desk and a tipped-over chair that had been perforated by a half dozen bullets coming in, from, and going out at the smashed big office windows.

Seconds dragged by. The gunfire ceased and was replaced by yells of frustration followed by something hard hitting something squishy. She looked sideways. Mr. Borkin was face down among shell casings and shattered glass. They had him. They were wearing black boots with thick rubber soles and were efficiently tying up and gagging the Turkish oligarch.

A few minutes later, Ellie was still in her precious little corner of the room, the one unriddled by any bullets. Her hands were now zip-tied behind her back. The ringing in her ears subsided. She could hear what the four new, and entirely unexpected, people in Mr. Borkin's office were saying.

Some of their communication was patently nonverbal. One of the masked goons picked Mr. Borkin up and kicked him in the stomach. He was indeed as stout and solid as he looked. He shuddered back a half step but kept his

feet. Her oligarch host remained upright until the second goon hit him on the temple with a baton.

Back on the floor, Borkin rolled over and cursed up at his attackers.
“*Chechenskaya sobaka!*”

“Relax, Boris. We are here to take you to spa in the mountains.”

Ellie realized their captors were speaking the universal languages of violence and bad English. The next speaker had a completely different accent.

“Don’t hurt him more,” the second man said, holding back the larger man’s hand. “You don’t cripple prisoner. We need him walking.”

“Yes,” a woman’s harsh voice from under a hood said. “You cripple, you carry.”

Ellie guessed some of the attackers might be from different countries, and bad English was their fastest way to communicate.

“Hurry up,” a fourth attacker said from the doorway into Mr. Borkin’s office.

When the ruffians had broken in through the window, their entry must have set off a panic alert. Steel bars had dropped down to cover the big double doors. The protective barrier had turned the office into a jail cell. Borkin’s security people were trying to break in.

Ferocious pounding came from the other side of the door. The metal panels were starting to dent inward. Then something very heavy slammed into them. From the sound, it could have been a vehicle, maybe one of the forklifts Ellie had seen in front of the tire factory. Borkin’s security people were using it to batter down their boss’s door.

“What about her?”

Ellie had been sort of hoping they would forget about her.

“Foreign whore,” the woman terrorist said. “Cut her throat and throw her out the window.”

Ellie took umbrage. As though killing her once wasn’t good enough.

“No!” She waved her hands. “Not prostitute. Journalist. *Basin*. Press. *Bana ateş etmeyin*. Do not shoot me.”

Before she left London, Smitty had insisted she learn at least that much Turkish.

“Papers, whore.”

They were really hung up on this obsession with tarts.

“T-there.” Ellie pointed to her bag, which was lying half under the overturned desk.

At the doorway, the ramming thing happened again. The outer doors had been completely pulverized into the big stainless-steel bars. These creaked and bent but stayed in place.

“*Ew rast e rojnamevan e!*”

Whatever that was, it sounded good. Then the man peered through his balaclava at her passport. The UK diplomatic seal flashed on the last page.

“Wait. She is some kind of diplomat. High-ranking consular status.”

Oh hashers!

“Take her,” the apparent leader of the group said.

Without preamble, and altogether too enthusiastically, the female terrorist pulled out some duct tape and put a piece over Ellie’s mouth. She also taped Ellie’s handbag with her completely useless diplomatic immunity documents to her shoulder.

Satisfied with her work, the brutish woman pushed her toward the open window. As she teetered on the edge, they remembered to put a harness over her before casting her off into the 300-foot abyss down to the smelter levels.

Elle dangled. The banging and thrashing from the outside of Borkin’s sealed office doorway reached a fever pitch.

The wheels of a zip line whirred. She tried not to look down. As she slid, she twirled around. Behind her, the terrorists were attaching the half-conscious Mr. Borkin to the steel rope tether and pushing him along.

Ellie hit the base of the zip line, landing in a small cloud of filth. A

hundred years of ash and burned rubber lay all over. Her clothes were ruined. She'd never be able to get her handbag strap fixed. On the bright side, they might execute her at any moment, so any shame and inconvenience would be short lived.

She had just caught sight of two obviously fake food delivery vans when they stuck a musty hood over her head. At least it kept the choking dust away from her nose, which was starting to clog up. This was a problem since her mouth was taped shut.

She tilted her head to the side, trying to expel snot through one nostril. It was not as easy as some homeless tramps made it seem. Blowing mucous into her hood was better than suffocating, but just barely.

Whump. The van doors shut.

Ellie could not believe it. One moment she had been chatting in the nice office of a polite oligarch, and the next minute they had both been stuffed in the back of a van that smelled of stale baked goods.

Mr. Borkin was still there. He was diligently muttering what she assumed were the most vulgar obscenities he could think of in the several languages he could speak.

“Be quiet, you pig dog of Turkish fascists,” one of their captors said. Ellie thought it was the baton-wielding brute. “Otherwise we send you down your own Ararat zip line, head first. Get it? First your head goes. Then a few minutes later, your body comes after.”

That comment raised the mirth level in the van. Grim chuckles echoed as they sped along. Ellie could not hear any sirens following them.

...

After what seemed like an hour of driving, the bread-smelling van was actually making Ellie hungry. They slowed and starting zigging and zagging.

The first few times, her head conked against the metal panel behind her. She got into the rhythm and prevented head thumps. Considering she could no longer feel her hands, could only breathe through one nostril, and felt a

sneeze coming on, she took this as a minor victory.

Long after she gave up trying to remember the left and right turns the van was making, the engine sound outside changed. Like it was echoing back on itself. It reminded her of driving through Rotherhithe Tunnel to east London to see a mad aunt who insisted on keeping goldfish in an outdoor pond even though they died every winter.

They jerked to a stop. Soon Ellie was yanked out of their transport by her hood. The air smelled foul. There was a hint of diesel fumes. A thump on her chest told her to stop. Off came her hood.

“What is this?” asked her female kidnapper. She was still wearing her face mask. That was a good sign, wasn’t it? In the films, if a victim sees their faces, it always ends—

The woman finally figured out Ellie’s ability to reply to questions would be enhanced by having the duct tape ripped off her face.

Ouch!

Ellie looked down. All her things were strewn out over a filthy table.

“Those look...” Ellie said, flexing her jaw muscles, “look like the items from my bag.”

“What kind of diplomat are you?”

In all the BBC shows, captured spies did seem to get the worst of it.

“I’m a reporter,” she said. The coating of duct tape glue on her lips made them stick with each word she spoke.

Ellie used the pauses in her normally eloquent speech to think. If she wasn’t a spy, what story could she sell? The woman’s accent gave her an idea. It sounded like the Kurdish documentaries she had watched.

“As you can see, I’ve got clearance to go to the new Kurdistan. My government was very anxious about my safety and therefore gave me temporary diplomatic status. The *Citizen Juggernaut* thinks it is very important that the good news about Kurdish independence comes out to a waiting world.”

“Those filthy Iraqi Kurd pigs!”

Oh, what have I done now?

Ellie had years of interviewing practice. However, it was almost exclusively with fashion designers and celebrities. Some of them were nearly as high-strung as these full-on terrorists. Though none of them had ever brought automatic weapons to a podcast. While this woman’s words were harsh, her body language relaxed.

“Sorry,” Ellie said, “but I thought you might support the new country. Assuming you are not exactly thrilled with the current regime in Turkey.”

Her captor was still angry but not so much with her anymore. “The Iraqi Kurds have their country now. But no right of return for us, the Turkish Kurds. We are stuck here in Turkey, with fucking filthy Turks.”

That’s probably not a picnic for either one of you.

“And,” Ellie said, trying to stay cheery, “when I file my complete story, I shall certainly mention your plight.”

“What is this?”

The woman was carefully examining each item from her bag. Presumably, she was looking for electronic devices. She had left her phone at Mr. Borkin’s reception.

“These are all pens? Not computer stylus?”

“No.”

“And this?” From her billfold, she took out a translucent rectangle.

Ellie heart thumped in her throat. It was her Licht/Net demonstrator device. It was called Lux/Net in the English-speaking world. It looked like a credit card but was supposed to be a holographic cell phone you could use anywhere. She had never gotten around to trying it. The device was labeled, so she’d have to think of a believable fiction.

“That’s Lux/Net,” Ellie said, taking a breath. It was her only means of contacting help. She had to risk fibbing to these homicidal maniacs. “It’s a luxury shopping network. All the best deals on exclusive brands.”

The woman looked closely at it. Had there been a recognizable USB port, she would have been sunk, but it looked just like a regular credit card.

“What’s taking so long, Mrs. Green?” another terrorist said from the other side of a cloth divider. They had obviously assigned themselves code names.

“Nothing,” Mrs. Green said and pulled a knife. Ellie’s zip ties came apart with a twang.

“Now unclothe yourself.”

Oh, bloody hell...

Ellie massaged some feeling back into her hands and did just that. Her captor shoveled all her things back into her handbag and zipped it closed.

She looked around. They were in some kind of tunnel or old mine. Thoughts of escape and rescue were put out of her mind by Mrs. Green’s next request. Of all the horrific things they could have demanded...

Mrs. Green kicked a bucket toward her.

“Next is long drive. You go piss now.”

18

TOWN OF FAYSH KAHBUR INTERSECTING BORDERS OF IRAQ, SYRIA, AND TURKEY

AGA TEMIR

His victim was strong. His victim had fought and killed his way to the pinnacle of his local faction of Iraq Sunni militia. He was ruthless and well-armed; this made him overconfident. He allowed Temir to get behind him.

With a quick snakelike motion, Temir pinioned the sitting man's arms and slapped his right forearm across his nose and mouth. Suddenly the Iraqi found himself in the embrace of a steel python. For Temir, the petty warlord's struggles were the protests of a kitten. His muffled gasps had no chance of being heard outside the command tent.

Temir could have slipped his forearm under the man's chin or broken his skull with an elbow strike. That would have been too quick. He wanted to savor the moment. He also wanted to observe the woman sitting on the other side of the flimsy folding table. Temir's man Eylül held her down, but she did not yell for help.

Pound by pound, Temir exerted inexorable viselike pressure. The man's jaw broke. His orbital eye bones crumpled. The ambushed warlord silently shuddered, spewing blood and saliva. All the while, Temir watched the large-eyed sultry young woman in camouflage fatigues. She did not flinch or try to help her Sunni kinsman. In fact, around her full wet lips, there hovered a hint

of cruel enjoyment.

Promising, very promising.

...

Temir had shed his birth name long ago. He assumed he had parents; perhaps they were patriots who had given a child to the organization. Perhaps they had been hanged as thieves. How he came to be raised by Turkish ultranationalists was not important. His past rise to power and future path to redemption for his beloved were all that mattered now.

The Grey Wolves had millions of members and the sympathy of all real Turks. During the First World War, their founders had led the Armenian Cleansing to rid their homeland of millions of inferior trash. More recently, Mehmet Ali Ağca had been among their members. Ağca had been sent by the Grey Wolves to kill Pope John Paul II. He failed.

Temir was also charged with a sacred mission. Unlike Ağca, he would not fail. He led a convoy of 100,000 fighters disguised as relief workers into war-torn Iraq. All of them thought Aga Temir of the Grey Wolves was a man to fear. They were wrong.

His lead section of the convoy had just crossed the Turkish border into Iraq. Trucks were refueling using prepositioned supplies. Their next push would take them down into the disintegrating Iraq. It was a glorious mess of sectarian violence. Turkish-backed Sunni Muslims in the North were pitted against Iran-backed Shi'a Muslims in the South. The bodies would pile higher than the ancient Great Ziggurat of Babylon. It would be wonderful to see, but he had to be elsewhere.

Blood trickled down his fingers. Temir's victim had bitten him; he pulled a broken tooth out of his forearm. From the ridge above the town of Faysh Kahbur, he looked down into the valley; a morning haze had settled. It remained just a hair's breadth above the ground. Bell sounds came out of the mist. They rang faintly out from towers atop the Christian churches.

How odd, Temir thought, that Eastern Christian Assyrians would cling to

this lowly patch of ground. They were surrounded by Muslims: Sunni, Shi'a, and Kurd. Each of those majorities had, in their time, tried to wipe out the Christian minority and drive them away. Several times, they had succeeded. But then, little by little, the Christians had returned to this part of northern Iraq. Their bells continued to ring.

Temir pulled a medic pack off the back of his truck and ripped open a pack of antiseptic wipes. Disguised as a Worldwide Help International convoy, they did not lack for sanitary and medical supplies. He cleaned drying blood from his forearms and fingers. There was other gore. Mucus? Saliva? It had even gotten between his fingers and under the fingernails.

A deep voice behind him spoke Turkish. "That was perhaps unwise."

His enhanced sense of hearing had already measured the footsteps coming up behind him. His hyper-keen sense of smell detected his companion's minty breath. His second-in-command chewed mint; it was an ineffective attempt to hide his use of tobacco. Eylül's imam in Istanbul had issued a fatwa against smoking.

"Eylül," Temir said without turning, "the man stood in our way. He was only interested in our ability to help the Sunnis defeat the Shi'a and the Iranians in the south. When we turn half our forces away from the road to Baghdad and toward Jordan, he would have betrayed us, or tried to."

"He had the loyalty of the local Sunni militia forces. What's to be done with them now?"

Temir thought about killing his best friend, Eylül. The psychologists in the lab he was raised in had been right. Once you started, it was hard to stop. But Eylül was a true believer in a new Ottoman Empire run by the Grey Wolves. He was still useful.

"There." Temir pointed to razor-etched slices in the sky. Jet contrails were heading to the northeast. "United States air power. They are protecting the Kurdish homeland. They will strike only against incursions by PKK from the north or Shi'a threatening Kurdistan from the south."

Years of planning and patience had borne a juicy geopolitical fruit. As soon as the United States had backed independence for the eight million Kurds living in Iraq, the federal government in Baghdad had imploded. After forty years of military involvement dating from the first Gulf War in 1990, the tottering Iraqi kleptocracy knew its time was up.

Iraqi politicians had stolen what they could, then signed a parliamentary resolution expelling all American forces. US forces would protect Kurdistan but nothing else. Washington and Europe would let the dogs fight over the scraps of the failed colonial state of Iraq. Maybe they were even looking forward to watching a war in which many brown Muslims, and no Americans, would die.

In the south of Iraq, the Shi'a militia and Iran had amassed an impressive number of tanks, troops, and surface-to-air missile batteries. Soon they would stab north at Baghdad, and there the Shi'a would run into Turkish-backed Sunni militia. Temir's forces and Saudi automated-robot battalions would fight a pitched battle against the best trained, best equipped Iranian armored corps.

Until a week ago, it was a fight Temir would not have missed for anything. It was the battle he was born to win. Then everything had changed. Temir's lust for glory had changed to the cold pulsing of ice water through his veins that cried out only for vengeance. He was set on a very personal jihad against Israel.

Eylül's feet shuffled behind him. Temir had to attend to the friends of the man he had just killed.

"The Sunni militia leaders who are our guests unfortunately wandered too close to the Kurdish lines," Temir said firmly. "They forgot there is no more Iraq. They were all shot." He put his hand up. "All except Meliha."

"The female?"

"We need someone known to the Sunni militia troops, someone they will follow."

Temir was sure that was Meliha, even if she was but a female. She was cruel, she was strong, and above all she knew that anything less than a broken enemy lying dead at your feet was not victory.

As Temir had squeezed and squeezed, feeling the man's cheekbones crush, skull crack, and the contents of ruptured sinuses ooze over his forearm, his training in biopsychology and superhuman senses had shown him the truth in Meliha. She had hated the dead man more than he. She did not look away as the local warlord writhed and twitched and fell still. She was glad he was dead. She was clearly open to forming a newer, more ambitious alliance.

"The militias will never follow a woman," Eylül said.

"They will. Especially when we tell them the story of how bravely she fought against the Americans and Kurds, even as she thought all was lost. The Sunnis will set aside their disdain for her sex if it means killing Shi'a and capturing oil fields."

"Yes, Temir."

"After you are done with the locals, make certain that everyone in the convoy hides their weapons." Temir threw the soiled antiseptic wipe into the opening of a biohazard chute on the side of the truck. "After all, we're on a humanitarian mission to help."

Temir climbed up into the cab of the lead truck. The powerful vehicle towed three container-sized trailers, all painted white. They bore the rod-and-circle Asclepius logo of Worldwide Help International.

He made sure Eylül was gone and climbed in. Alone in the cab of the truck, he pulled out a medical case. Inside was something larger than his hand. It looked like a translucent sea anemone. It was made from his own DNA. Temir imagined it was what he would look like as a protozoan invertebrate.

He opened his shirt and pressed it into his heavily muscled abdomen, just below his liver. It sucked fast onto the scarred site which was already familiar to it. Short flexible tubules extended needlelike grippers and dug in

deliciously. The creature injected him with physical and mental enhancers. These were not mere pharmaceuticals; the organism synthesized chemicals tuned to his precise genetic needs. They made him stronger, faster, and smarter than any soldier in history.

Twenty minutes and some shouting and muted gunfire later, Eylül rejoined him. Temir adjusted the tinting of the truck's windshield against the glare of the rising sun. It was time to go.

The radio piped up.

"My fellow Iraqi citizens, it is with a heavy heart I bring you news of our betrayal by the United States of America.

After four decades of brutal occupation, military, religious, and cultural domination, it has come to this: US armed forces are supporting the illegal and sinful separation of so-called Kurdistan. With their wicked military might, they are destroying the very nation we hold so dear.

Therefore as a last act before we dissolve the People's Democratic Parliament of Iraq, I call upon our faithful brothers in Iran to come and rescue what is left of our bereaved country. Inshallah—"

He switched it off.

Inshallah? Temir thought bitterly as the rush of the symbiont chemical hit him. *Fuck Allah, fuck Islam, and especially fuck Mohammed.* He just wanted to see the world burn, all of it: Jews, Christians, Muslims, Druze, Hindus, and Buddhists.

"Inshallah," Temir whispered to the uncanny symbiont creature. He put the truck in gear. His vehicle moved forward, followed by hundreds more just like it.

Temir the Grey Wolf was to be feared, but he was much more than just a man.

19

PKK KURDISH REBEL TERRITORY TURKEY

ELLIE

After the most disgusting and least private powder-room session in the history of toilette, Ellie got back most of her clothes. Most importantly, they gave back her bag with the stealth Lux/Net device inside. It might not even work deep in this abandoned mine the Kurdish rebels had dragged her and Mr. Borkin to, but at least it was there.

One thing at a time, she thought as she struggled to put her shoes back on without touching the grimy black cavern wall.

Ellie decided her first job was to bring cheer to her kidnappers. Maybe Stockholm syndrome worked both ways. The *Juggernaut* had once put on a seminar on kidnaps and ransom. At the time, Ellie hadn't paid much attention. The presenter was wearing argyle socks with brown shoes; it had been too distracting. She did pick up little snippets of information which, in her current happenstance, were quite vital. Captives sometimes took sides with their kidnappers. The inverse was worth a shot.

Ellie smiled and handed over her bucket of pee. "Thank you, er, Mrs. Green."

The terrorist woman grunted, scratching at the moth-eaten balaclava covering her face.

“Is there a Mr. Green?”

Coal-black eyes stared out of tatty holes. For a chilling moment, Ellie thought she had really bungled it. Then Green laughed grimly.

“Yes. There is Mr. Green. He is in prison of the Turks.”

Further captive-captor bonding stopped when a battered Mr. Borkin was pushed into the room. A filthy rag had been taped over the cut in his head. At some point during their journey, the right side of his face had received a good thumping. The older businessman’s eye had nearly swollen shut, and his cheekbone looked wobbly.

Seeing her out of his left eye, he mumbled “Sorry” and then spat more curses at their captors.

There was a small stove. The flue ran into a shaft cut into the solid rock of the ceiling of what surely must be an abandoned mine. Ellie looked at the walls. They dripped moisture and were covered by unhealthy-looking lichen.

The area they were in might have served as a cooking area for underground miners. The flue above the stove was clogged. From the smell of the smoke that came spewing back, the pipe might be filled with dead birds and rodents. Ellie coughed, suddenly homesick for refreshing London smog.

“Drink. Eat. We go soon,” the leader, Mr. Black, said. “Soon hoods back on heads.”

Boris Borkin must have had some kind of electronic device or weapon secreted in his belt. It had been removed and duct-tape suspenders were keeping his pants up. The meal they were given consisted of stale bread from the back of their decoy kidnapping bakery van and local yogurt sprinkled with the brown lichen that kept dropping from the ceiling.

As promised, the hoods were soon back on their heads.

Ellie reasoned they were now in at least two separate cars. She was quite certain they exited via a different tunnel than the one by which they had entered. The first tunnel had been relatively smooth driving. Their current route featured a vicious thumping coming from the left side of the car. The

wheels seemed to be going over railroad ties. Perhaps this tunnel was where hand-pushed carloads of whatever they mined here were taken out.

Fat chance of anyone tracking us now, she thought.

The car was drafty. As they picked up speed, Ellie could make out two distinct sounds. A whining, as though a coat hanger were whooshing through air. She imagined it was some kind of antenna sticking from the car body. In addition, there was a flapping, as though a patch of plastic had come loose. It occurred to Ellie half the country seemed to be held together by duct tape. They used it as a substitute for—

Without warning, their car lurched. Gravel crunched under the wheels. A distinct thump sounded against the passenger side. When things rattled to a standstill, the only sound was a low moaning.

“Get out!” Mrs. Green yelled angrily.

Underneath her hood, Ellie fumed, ready to lash out with biting sarcasm. As if this, or for that matter anything else involving this shambolic kidnapping, was her fault.

Ellie’s hood came off. They were out of the tunnel and on a two-lane road. The sky was darkening. Mr. Borkin was lying on the side of the road. The lead car was stopped just in front of them with its rear door flapping open. Mr. Black ran over to their car.

“He just jump the fuck out,” Mr. Black said defensively, slapping his hands together. “Like that. No fucking warning.”

Her fellow prisoner had more gumption than common sense. Borkin, also bound and wearing a blackout hoodie, had somehow unlatched his door and flung himself out. Ellie’s car had hit him as he tried to run off.

“Oh my!” Ellie gasped. She got a brief look at the oligarch’s very broken arm.

The limb was flopping all the wrong ways, as though it did not have any joints at all.

“That man needs medical attention.”

“Okay. You attend him, Mrs. Diplomat.” Mr. Black untied her hands and gave her a roll of duct tape. “By the time I fix cars, you must fix fucking Borkin. Fuck!”

Despite being hardened by the realities of rough and ready health care by the cuts to the UK’s National Health Service, Ellie felt this was beyond the pale.

“Is that all?” she snapped back. “Tape and roadside twigs? Are you mad? Haven’t you anything else?”

After a moment of searching, Mrs. Green came back with a bottle. “Raki.” Turkish vodka. She’d had a few shots of it at the hotel bar.

“Don’t waste.”

Ellie uncapped it, took a good swig, and tried to keep a stiff upper lip. Then she thought Borkin might benefit from some too.

“Well, Mr. Borkin,” she said in the cheeriest voice she could manage, “where the day has taken us, huh?”

He groaned, and she held the raki bottle to his lips. He sipped.

Erring on the side of using more tape and more twigs, in a few minutes, Ellie had Mr. Borkin’s arm ensconced in a rigid cocoon. He had drained most of the bottle of local spirits and was sulking quietly.

“I know people,” Borkin said. “Turkish president even knows me. They come for me and you’ll be sorry, *gryaznyye sobaki*.”

“Now, Mr. Borkin,” Ellie whispered, “we don’t want to antagonize our hosts, the ones with guns and knives, do we?”

“*Gryaznyye... gryazn...*” Borkin said, and then he passed out.

Ellie and Mrs. Green lugged the captain of the tire industry into a car. Mr. Black supervised.

“You watch him.” Black pushed Ellie into the lead car. “Make sure he don’t die.”

She looked at her patient. Borkin was a snoring bundle of blood, bruises, and duct tape. His cheek and shoulder were embedded with road gravel.

There was no way to tell whether the man was not already bleeding to death internally.

“Mr. Black, I shall certainly give it my all.”

Mr. Black pushed Mrs. Green into the front of the car.

“You watch Chinese lady. Make sure that she make sure that he don’t die.”

Ellie was about to stand up for her mixed Eurasian heritage. Instead, she made sure Borkin’s head was on some padding. During an abduction, staying silent was often a virtue.

Over the next few hours, Ellie Sato’s road tour of rural—she guessed eastern—Turkey was broken only by occasional moans from Boris Borkin and the rude shifting of rusty manual-transmission gears. Well past dark, they arrived at an insurgent outpost. Had she had a hood on her, she could not have been at a greater loss as to where exactly the heck she was.

“In.” Mr. Black motioned to a wooden shack protruding from the base of what looked like a landslide.

Ellie and Mrs. Green half carried Mr. Borkin inside the farmhouse. The walls were rough logs covered with mud.

“He is living,” the woman said. “You do right.”

“Wait till he gets my bill,” Ellie tried to joke.

There were two moldering mattresses on the floor. Nothing so revolting ever looked so comfy. Just as she had steeled herself to sleep through the bug and flea bites which her surroundings virtually guaranteed, the door flung open again.

What now?

Ellie was led on yet another walk. Right outside the small log structure were mud planks; these led past a deep gorge. In the dusk, the gaping open-pit mine looked bottomless. They went to a house about three times as big as the shack with the mattresses but the same amount of moss on its walls.

Inside there was a good deal of hubbub. Voices were raised in energetic discussion. “*Dîplomasiya*” and “*rûsî*” were words often repeated. She

guessed their meaning.

A lean man in green fatigues and a neatly tied headscarf approached.

“I am Commander Jorin,” he said. “You are prisoners of PKK Cell 301.”

Something bugged Ellie. It nagged at her through her increasingly foggy mind. *Oh crap. He’s not wearing a mask.*

Then she noticed Mrs. Green and Mr. Black still had on their masks. Perhaps everyone knew of Commander Jorin. Maybe he had a terror video channel. There was no reason for her to panic.

“You are diplomat?”

The PKK cell leader looked her over. She must look a right mess, more of a rough sleeper just roused than a noted journalist and secret MI6 spy.

“Now, Commander Jorin, here’s the thing...” Ellie rattled off the names of the hosts who were expecting her in the newly establishing Kurdistan.

“So you see, the PKK and the Kurdish people in general have everything to gain by—”

“What you know of Kurdish ‘in general’?” Jorin snapped, whipping his index finger at her like a scythe. “Those pig dogs in Iraq have agreed to a closed border and no right of return for us Kurds stuck in Turkey.”

“That doesn’t seem right,” Ellie said. “If you let us go, I shall certainly mention your grievances in my article.”

“They have left my people here,” Jorin said, clearly set on wallowing in his own violent misery. “We are one people, one culture, for five thousand years. We have our language, our art, our songs. In First World War the Turks killed two million Armenians. Will we Kurds left in Turkey be next?”

“In Tunceli crackdown of 2017,” Mrs. Green put in bitterly, “Turkish soldiers are evacuating and burning villages. In the southeast, millions are homeless.”

Ellie caught sight of a chair with professional lighting umbrellas on either side. In front of it was a stand for a video camera. Maybe that was for making ransom demands. She looked closely at the chair. There were dark stains on

the cushions. Perhaps they were made by grape juice spilled by the last ransom demand presenter.

Ellie's own throat became very dry. She remembered embassies were not the only places journalists were routinely dismembered. She forced herself to look on the bright side before her tonsils swelled to the size of goose eggs.

"What a wonderful opportunity this is!"

The terrorists stared at her.

"Don't you see? This is a perfect example of why you must strike while the iron is hot." Ellie cringed inwardly at the unintentionally violent metaphor. "You need to show people your good side."

Commander Jorin's smile contained no mirth and was broad enough to reveal steel molars. However, he was listening.

"If your people pay," he said, "we release. Cash and gold, no checks."

"Commander, insurgents, I'm going to offer you something better than money," Ellie said, summoning the gall of a street chugger pestering pensioners for donations during London's rush hour. "And that is... my personal cachet as a TV and social media personality. You can be the heroes of this story."

They seemed to be paying attention.

"Tell me, Commander, are there any horrible people around?" *Besides your bloody selves.* "Awful desperados? There must be someone..."

Mr. Black said casually, "Oh, is plenty."

"Sakik Gang."

"Zana Battalion."

"Vitally Clan."

"Don't forget Dicle Scum," Jorin said.

"Do they really call themselves that?" Ellie cringed at the awful branding.

"All other names were taken. It is accurate. Dicle Scum, they kill and torture your enemies for money. The raping of men and women is 'on the house'."

“Scum indeed,” Ellie agreed. “Let’s suppose that it was one of those groups who kidnapped myself and Mr. Borkin. No one can prove it wasn’t. You, the valiant PKK 301 group, came to our rescue. After a courageous fight, you triumphed and set us free.”

“But you are not free.”

“Work with me here, Commander,” Ellie said, feeling them become receptive to her deception. “Having bonded with you, our rescuers, Mr. Borkin and I refused to leave until you were properly compensated. We insisted you be recognized for your heroic actions. Given what I know about my fellow hostage’s finances, payment will be the least of your worries.”

The threat of imminent gruesome death concentrated Ellie’s mind wonderfully. She even managed to grasp on to a little bit of helpful trivia.

“My column is syndicated in China and India. That’s more than three billion people. Those two big countries have refused to demonize the PKK as a terror group. You are freedom fighters. Think of the increased political pressure this story could bring in your favor. It might even help free people like Mrs. Green’s husband.”

Just like that, Ellie knew she had them, she could feel them drop right into the palm of her outstretched—

“Fermandar, dronek heye!”

A boy burst in. He had binoculars dangling from a string around his neck and was gesturing wildly. He pointed out the door up at the dark sky.

Jorin rounded on Ellie like he was about to knock her sideways. “You just keep me talking while government drones track you here!”

“I don’t know anything about drones.”

“You!” The commander pointed at Black and Green. “Lock these two in explosive vests. Prepare for glory!”

Rough hands seized her from behind. Ellie wanted scream: *You frigging slimy knobs!*

She had just finished being so bloody diplomatic. Nobody at the United

Nations could have done better. Now they were preparing to wrap her in dynamite, secured, no doubt, by their stupid duct tape. Not just her but Boris, a crippled unconscious man sleeping off a bottle of raki. She wanted to stomp her feet and call them all bloody beasts.

She would have, too, but then a metal cylinder that looked like a large tin can rolled into the middle of the room. It exploded with a bright flash, loud bang, and cloud of vapor that made her instantly tear up.

Everyone in the room lost their wits.

She got knocked to her knees and was in danger of being trampled as all the insurgents struggled to get out the door. There were one or two pistol shots.

Ellie crawled over and tried to get Boris to his feet. The man weighed nearly twice as much as she did. She decided she would come back after she got a breath of air and figured out what the actual heck was going on. On her way out, she ran straight into an alien.

He was huge. His skin was deathly white. From behind a sinister-looking breath mask shone glowing blue eyes.

He fired a sort of ray gun. This weapon had a huge round magazine and let off electric sparks as it zapped the PKK thugs. Some more than once.

Mr. Black got zapped in the shoulder, and he dropped his gun and stumbled. His arm flopped loosely like it was asleep. With his left, he pulled out a knife and started slashing wildly about. Two more alien bullets hit him in the chest, sending strobes of blue electricity where they impacted.

“Eleanor Sato?” the alien roared in a low bass voice muffled by his mask. “Get down!”

She ducked. Someone—it could have been Mrs. Green—came rushing at them. The spaceman let loose a fusillade of whatever he was shooting. The assailant lurched and fell in her tracks.

Ellie could not see anything more than three feet in front of her. Someone pulled her toward the door.

“Ellie! We meet again.”

She looked up into a face featuring a robust jawline and very straight white teeth.

“Captain Atticus! How did you—”

“The hills are crawling with these assholes,” the American said. “We’ve got to move.”

“Wait! My fellow hostage, Mr. Borkin.”

“Captain, there’s more coming!” the very pale man cautioned.

She was still disoriented. Atticus’s arm held her up as they stood outside the building. She grabbed on tight to the American. Her feet balanced on planks along the steep drop into the open pit of the mine gorge.

“Don’t spare ammo, Sarge Bryan, shoot them.” Atticus looked down at her. “I’ll try to find Borkin. But you’re the priority.”

“You filthy Turk scum!” a hoarse phlegmy voice shouted at them.

Out of the smoke came Jorin. He was holding an explosive vest in either hand, arms outstretched wide. Sarge Bryan raised his weapon.

“Don’t.” Atticus stopped him. “Those charges are studded with ball bearings. We’re deep inside the kill zone if even one of those vests goes off.”

“American pig dog, you give her back now.” Commander Jorin glanced over his shoulder. “We want only to keep—*heff*—our guests. When ransom gets paid, you get them back.”

Even Ellie could tell Jorin was stalling so his people could surround Atticus. They would certainly kill them all and film it just to teach them a lesson.

Ellie strategically bent over and coughed her lungs out. From her position, she saw something that made her want to stall.

“Commander Jorin,” Ellie cried out from her knees, “you will agree we were onto something before this misguided rescue effort happened, correct?”

“What?” Jorin shouted, waving his explosive vests. “Shut your mouth, you diplomatic bit—”

His words were cut short by a bayonet blade piercing through the back of his neck and coming out just above his prominent Adam's apple.

"PKK *der'mo pyatna*," snarled Mr. Borkin. The wounded but feisty man was holding a rifle that had to be a hundred years old, but the bayonet on the end worked well enough. His bandaged arm was supporting the barrel, and he had the strap wound around his right forearm so he could stab with it.

"Push him over quickly," Atticus yelled sharply.

Boris did not need encouragement. He pushed Commander Jorin over the edge of the gorge into the open pit. The stricken man's body began to collapse, and his fingers scrabbled at the vests' detonators.

Then the duct tape on Borkin's arm got caught in the rifle strap. The bayonet was stuck in Jorin's neck.

"Oh!" was all the battered Russian oligarch had time to say. He was pulled over the railing along with the falling terrorist. A *BOOM!* and hot back blast sent Ellie stumbling back toward Atticus.

She swore she could hear ball bearings whistling above her head. One hit the pale soldier's helmet, knocking it sideways. He groaned, then signaled he was okay. PKK reinforcements came at them from over a bridge.

"Cable's too thick," Atticus yelled. "Can't cut the bridge down. Throw some grenades and let's go!"

She looked into the ravine. Sparks and cinders rose like evil flaring fireflies. Far down, a burning clump of something slammed against a rock wall and was gone.

Bugger. Poor Mr. Borkin.

She looked at her arm. She still had her purse taped to it. Fat lot of good diplomatic immunity had done.

Ellie ran and ducked further down as each *pop-pop-pop* of gunfire sounded. With a grimace of white teeth under camouflage makeup, Atticus led the way as they made their escape.

20

NEAR BEN GURION AIRPORT

DAVID

The flames engulfing Ben Gurion Airport were a kilometer behind them, casting an eerie glow up at low-hanging clouds of smoke. David's hands relaxed a little on the steering wheel. He wiped sand off his palms. He, Boaz, and their car had been caked with dust and filth kicked up by the hellacious explosion that took out the control tower.

He was taking his brother to deploy Israel's nukes. Israel had never admitted having nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, it had many, in all shapes and sizes.

"Maybe you should let the mechBrain drive," Boaz advised from the passenger seat. Miss Aleph immediately objected to the insulting term.

"Acting Minister Baumann, respectfully, I'm an ASI machine mind, certified kosher by the Chief Rabbinate."

"We don't want Miss Aleph to take the wheel," David said, figuring out the fastest route to the mysterious Negev Desert location on his brother's map. "Lia added safety algorithms. She drives like a ninety-year-old."

When he thought about them at all, David always imagined Israel's nukes were located on or close to their deployment vehicles: rockets, airplanes, submarines. In the event of a total decapitation strike destroying the Israeli government and military, their two most highly advanced submarines, the *Magen* and the *Sica*, would ensure their enemies paid in full for any nuclear

or biochemical aggression.

The sudden devastation at Ben Gurion Airport had been shocking. Every instinct he had told him to find out more. Get back home to Lia. He could not. Boaz was in the chain of command now, and in wartime, that was a matter of life and death. There would be time for answers later.

“We have to go quickly,” Boaz said.

David sulked. He did not like Boaz’s superior attitude, not since forever. He did not like being kept in the dark. He was getting a big helping of both. The explosion that took out the control tower was like nothing he had ever experienced.

“Miss Aleph, do something useful with your kosher ASI brain. Assemble an analysis of that explosion,” David said.

“I might have a better analysis if you hadn’t landed on top of me.”

“It melted concrete and shattered the foundations,” Boaz said, staring out the passenger window. Again, he gave the impression of knowing more than he was saying.

“Best guess, Miss Aleph.”

“A thermobaric overpressure device. Similar to the Russian Father of All Bombs.”

Well, that crossed most terror groups off the list of suspects. They used inaccurate rockets, none of which had the precision or the payload to seriously damage Israel’s main airport.

“Take a left here.”

David ignored Boaz.

“It’s quicker the way I told you.”

“Not at this time of day,” David shot back. “The herders from the Arab roads often have strays. Unless you want a hood ornament made of mutton, we keep straight.”

Then it was Boaz’s turn to sulk.

After a few minutes of silence, David thought he saw flashes from the direction of the Mediterranean. Air-raid sirens alternated with the hum of distant traffic.

Along the highway, electronic billboards flashed civil-alert messages mixed in with ads for volocopter flying cars. Many just played static or were dark.

“Your men back there, they were Army Intelligence Directorate?”

The two guys guarding Boaz had been disabled by the blast.

“They were Minister Yossi’s best men.”

“We should not have left them.”

“Of course we should have. You never were able to see the big picture.”

“Yes, Minister.”

David wondered how badly Boaz was in over his head. His mentor Yossi had been the experienced war veteran. A traitor and a mass murderer, yes, but a better minister of defense than his bookish, conscientious objector brother.

Was Boaz capable of making the right decisions? Conflicts like the Six-Day War and Yom Kippur War were measured in hours and minutes. At its narrowest point, Israel was less than ten miles wide. In protecting the Jewish State, there was no room for a strategic retreat, no room for do-overs.

“Now we turn left,” David said, skidding the car over some gravel. “See?”

Boaz grunted.

“The networks, even microwave military channels, are all having problems,” David said, fishing for details.

“I’ve heard.”

“As minister, you must have some intel. Is it the Gazans? Have they upped their game with some new terror weapons fabricated in molecular 3-D printers?”

“Gazans?” Boaz snapped. “We’ve had them stuck in an open-air prison for three generations. We’ve bombed them, burned them with white phosphorous, cut off their gas and electricity, employed every aspect of the Dahiya doctrine of scorched-earth destruction of civilian infrastructure. We made them drink their own sewage water, for fuck’s sake. They’re no threat.”

“They kill Jews.”

“For every one of ours they kill, we kill what, ten of them? Fifty? You’ve added to those numbers yourself.”

David did not get his brother’s attitude. Everyone knew Boaz had an intense dislike for Gazans and their militias because of a childhood friend who had been killed by a missile fired into Israel by Islamic Jihad. Boaz was probably taking their side for the sole purpose of arguing with him.

“I’m precise,” David said with pride. “Check my file. You’ve got access now. Anyone can drop a two-thousand-pound bomb on an apartment block. At Unit 101, we wait weeks, even months, to take out immediate threats. To do that takes—”

“What? A special set of balls? Skills?”

“Whatever it is, you don’t have it.”

“You never killed someone who didn’t deserve it?”

David did not reply.

“You’ll never be anything more than a blunt instrument,” Boaz said, stewing in whatever misery broth was simmering in his complicated brain. “For the love of our homeland, let others do the thinking.”

The patronizing tone in his brother’s voice, which was intended to remind him of his place as an outsider in the Baumann family, irritated David the most. He sped past a sign:

NO ENTRY
CLOSED MILITARY AREA!!!

“When we get there, let me do the talking,” Boaz instructed.

“Sure.”

“Leave any weapons in the car.”

Down a small access road, David noticed three rings of sensors. To anyone else, they would appear to be mile markers and dilapidated fence posts. They came to what looked like a construction site. David jostled the car over treads left by heavy bulldozers and parked next to the only structure, a concrete

gatehouse stood by itself.

The first human guard was behind what looked like a foot of one-way mirrored glass. Boaz stuck his ID card through a slot a few millimeters wide. It got sucked into the most evil-looking ATM on Earth.

Seconds later, in the opposite wall, a solid pillar of stone rotated. The other side was shaped into a cavity with barely enough room to hold a man. Boaz stepped into it, the column rotated again, and David got into the next one.

It was a unique doorway. Impossible to breach by normal means. Explosives would just seal it shut. The most confined revolving door ever invented deposited them in a narrow hallway.

“Place smells like bleach,” Boaz muttered.

David was more interested in the holes in the ceiling. He suspected had they been unauthorized something more caustic than bleach would have come raining down.

“You’ve never been here.”

“No one has,” Boaz said absently. “I mean, no one important.”

At the end of the corridor, there was no door. They walked around a zigzag turn and found themselves in a vaulted warehouse area.

Two serious-looking guards, a man and a woman, stood there. They both wore overalls. On their shoulders was a patch he had never seen before: a Star of David with some electrons whirling around it like an atom.

“Shalom,” Boaz said. “There’s some disruption in wireless. I assume you went to hardline backup?”

“Yes, Minister,” the female guard said.

She had the look of a Romanian weightlifter and carried a nonlethal stunner. It probably used no electricity. Shooting bullets or setting off tasers in here was probably not a good idea.

“We also received confirmation through dispatch tube.”

She unfurled a piece of coded paper. David had seen these before. The edges had to fit precisely with one-time order pads locked in a vault on site.

Once used, they were discarded. The second guard had a handset, and Boaz handed him his own printout on thermal paper. All three had to match.

The guards entered codes into consoles which stood on opposite sides of the room, out of line of sight from one another. Two keys twisted. The final door split horizontally like a cargo elevator, revealing the final chamber. Inside what felt like a pharaoh's tomb was the treasure of the Israelites' nuclear arsenal.

It looked like a small very clean warehouse. There were alcoves with sophisticated pallet systems holding hard plastic boxes. These ranged from ones the size of a basketball to the largest which resembled a big mobile latrine. David thought he could feel a breeze, but it must have been the climate control.

"One device is authorized," Boaz said.

The guards agreed, and so did the on-site mechBrain. The designated alcove lit up. Inside was a hard plastic suitcase with no markings.

David saw something odd. "What in Moses's name is that?"

It looked like a huge metal meatball.

"That's the Old Lady," the male guard said readily. David guessed they did not get many social visitors. "The Spider. They call it that for the way it looks. Our first bomb from the 1960s. Ben-Gurion's ultimate insurance policy. He insisted on building it after meeting Einstein and Oppenheimer."

Round and about the size of a dishwasher and festooned with hundreds of wires coming out of dozens of spark plugs, it sat by itself. He looked closer; there was a small silver plaque with an engraving: *Never Again*.

"She hasn't been mobilized since 1973," Boaz said, "when the Yom Kippur War was going badly."

That was not something his brother would know, unless he had been studying the history of this ancient nuclear bomb. Why?

"The Spider is not in a secure alcove," David said.

"It still works," the female guard said. "The device has been upgraded, and

the fissile materials are checked regularly. It's not like we can put it in a museum, right? So they decided to store it."

The female guard looked at the Spider with technical interest, not fear. David thought this special unit must have advanced training in physics to qualify to guard these devices.

"It was designed to be initiated manually by the crew inside a flying aircraft," she told them. "Or rolled into Damascus on a nice, well-tuned lorry —"

Before she could finish, the male guard struck at her with his baton. David was faster. He had read the attacker's body posture as he came up behind his intended victim and intercepted the weapon strike with a cross-handed Krav block.

More swiftly than one would expect from someone of her build, the thickset woman retaliated with a savage kick that snapped the male guard's ankle. He fell, howling in agony.

Boaz picked up the fallen baton and hit the woman. Her eyes rolled in her head, and she dropped on top of the downed man.

Holy shit!

Horrified, David watched as Boaz prodded the unconscious woman with his club. The second guard, Boaz's accomplice in whatever he was planning, was grimacing in agony and pinned under the heavy woman. His brother was someone who had let their sisters deal with bugs that had fallen and become trapped in the bathtub. They looked at each other.

"Now what, Mr. Minister?"

"Now, brother," Boaz said, breathing heavily. "You help me move the Spider."

21

TEL AVIV

LIA

Lia loaded some extra ammunition for her rifle. There was a lot of open road between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. The seventy kilometers would normally take less than an hour to drive. But tonight she had to be ready for anything.

“Whoa,” Spencer said. “Breaking out the ‘gatt,’ huh?”

Steph swatted his arm. “Stop trying to sound hip, Spence, you’re not a gangster.”

Lia was suddenly self-conscious of her tricked-out assault weapon. It was part of her emergency deployment kit, and she had not thought of the impact its sudden appearance would have on a civilized American.

They had just been joking and eating pizza. Now they were loading the car with ballistic vests, helmets, and night-vision gear.

“I have to go find my parents in Jerusalem,” Lia said, thinking back on the fitful phone call from her father. “You guys can stay here. It’s very secure.”

Air-raid sirens gurgled oddly from poles and rooftops as though their digital audio files were corrupted. Lia did not believe Tel Aviv could be in real danger. The greater Gush Dan area held seventy percent of Israel’s Jews and eighty percent of its industrial economy. During the four years of the Second Intifada there had been a few Arab suicide bombings here, but mostly violence had consisted of the overwhelming majority of Jews, Druze, and

Christians retaliating and stoning the Arab Muslim minority.

A rolling boom like dry thunder shook the windows.

“Oh, no you don’t, my well-armed girlfriend.” Steph was adamant. “We’re sticking with you.”

“Let me drive.” Eitan moved toward the driver’s door.

“No way.” Lia grabbed the door handle first. “Don’t make me tell David you were unruly.”

The pizza delivery boy and part-time IDF-security service stringer smiled and held the door for her. David must have scared the crap out of him. Good. Then there was a chance he would listen if things got exciting.

“You expecting trouble?” Spencer said, staring at the bayonet and smoke grenades on her three-day rucksack.

“I’m sure it’s just a misunderstanding,” Lia said as casually as she could.

On the phone, her parents had sounded really frightened. They had abandoned their house and fled to the shelter. How bad were things getting in the ancient capital city?

“Yeah,” Steph scoffed in her husky but feminine voice. “In the Holy Land, one minute it’s a misunderstanding, the next it’s a massacre.”

They drove off to find Lia’s parents.

“We got rough spots in the States, y’know. Like Chicago.” Spencer was still trying to sound macho while putting his seat belt on.

“Does Chicago have separate colored license plates, separate roads, and separate public transit for minorities who the state is afraid will kill the ruling classes?” Steph asked.

“Nope.”

“Then it’s not like Chicago,” Steph said bitterly.

“I have my A driving license,” Eitan added.

“Boy,” Lia said, unable to engage the GPS navigator, “if I have to shoot, you can hold the steering wheel.”

There was no one else on the street. Through some cracks in a window

blind, Lia could see the flickering of a television set broadcasting to an empty couch.

Shachar Adom. Red Dawn.

The GPS sputtered on. She hit her saved destination on Heleni ha-Malka Street. The car's nav system spat back nonsense.

Fastest route, no traffic

480 hours (6013.2 km)

What a piece of crap.

Lia had been hoping her military-grade nav system might guide them around any roadblocks or checkpoints that had been set up during the emergency.

"Eitan, you can be my RTO. My radio telephone operator." Lia handed him her handset. "Answer it if it rings. Even if it's a wrong number. Maybe whoever calls will know more about what's going on in Jerusalem."

"I knew we should have gotten an earlier flight," Steph muttered. "Now I'll never get Spencer on a plane."

"Buckle up, everyone."

They had traveled only a few blocks when Spencer remembered the cat.

"You sure he'll be all right?"

Lia had nearly forgotten their house guest. "Khóshekh seems independent."

"Khóshekh is a cat!" Eitan snorted as only a teenager could. "I knew he wasn't a secret agent. Major Baumann just said that to get rid of me."

"The house mechBrain knows he's there and will put out food, water, and even run the new cat box we bought."

Lia wished she had access to Miss Aleph. That AI was much more adaptable. She had programmed the feisty digital phantom to help David navigate through his day better.

Red smears blazed ahead in the night. Road flares. Their first detour.

Lia made sure she had her IDF identification handy. Their license plate was Israeli yellow. A remote scan of their identity chip should show

additional information such as “Jewish” and “Active Military,” which would let them pass without inspection, despite having weapons in the car.

However, mistakes happened. People tried using fake plates. Reservists with guns shot first and checked IDs later. Lia slowed down well in advance of the torches.

Dragon’s teeth had risen up out of the asphalt. They were eight feet high and looked like they could tear the guts out of the biggest D9 bulldozers. It was part of Home Front’s last line of defense to slow down intifada mobs. She had never seen them deployed.

“No one there. I guess they’re gone for pizza,” Spencer the American said jauntily. “We should have brought some.”

The unmanned checkpoint made Lia doubly cautious. The soldiers were either goofs or had gone after someone attacking them.

“You guys stay here,” Lia said.

She thought about her rifle. She was in civilian clothes. As a Bedouin Christian, she was pretty brown-looking. She left the weapon, gave Eitan a “don’t even think about it” look, and closed the car door.

The reservist who was supposed to be at the checkpoint was on the other side of a shopping mall. He was talking, or trying to talk, to a Haredi Jewish man in a fur hat. They were standing next to the dinkiest little car she’d ever seen. One of its wheels was so badly twisted it looked ready to fall off.

“Moy ar povrezhden!”

The checkpoint soldier did not speak Russian. The Orthodox man was not fluent in spoken Hebrew. He might be a new arrival to Israel or from a community that believed Hebrew should not be spoken aloud until messianic prophecies were fulfilled. Either way, the young sentry was getting more and more frustrated.

“He says his car is busted up,” Lia said, holding out her IDF identification.

“I can see that,” the sentry said. His rank was *rav turai*, the NATO equivalent of a corporal. “What’s he want?”

Lia stared at the guy. He looked at her ID again.

“Uh, what’s he want, Segen Baumann, ma’am?”

Though she worked mostly as a programmer, Lia’s segen rank was the equivalent of first lieutenant.

“*Kak my mozhem vam pomoch?*” Lia said. She was assigned to signals intelligence. In Israel, Russian was second only to Arabic as a useful language to know. Russian military advisors, data, and equipment were everywhere in the Middle East region.

Here we go, she thought.

The Orthodox man saw she was female and looked away. He used one hand as a blinder. Lia always thought that was funny. He looked like a preteen who had accidentally wandered into the girls’ bathroom. Contact with women not members of their immediate family was uncomfortable for them.

He was, however, able to explain.

“Okay,” Lia translated. “When the dragon’s teeth barricade came up for the alert, they damaged his car. Mr. Adelman just wants a receipt saying that. Then he’ll take the bus home.”

The guard felt around in the overstuffed pockets of his combat vest for a pen and pad.

Behind her, someone yelled. It came from around the corner where she had left her friends. Lia dashed back.

An obnoxious voice came from down the road, speaking bad Arabic.

“Get back your house! There’s curfew on. Take the Arab-lover white man with you.”

Lia relaxed. It was not an enraged mob, just the checkpoint guards hassling Stephanie and Spencer.

She walked out. All three reservists jumped and pointed their guns.

“Halt!” said the first guy. He had bright-red hair and his helmet was at his waist, not on his head, where regulations said it should be.

“There’s another one,” he said in Hebrew. “What did I tell you? Arabs are

like roaches. When you see one, you know there's fifty in the walls."

That got Lia irate. They still had their flashlights trained on her, and their flashlights were screwed on to the barrels of their rifles. Not cool, and worthy of an IDF citation and reprimand.

The redheaded guy advanced on her. "Get back home," he said in his haphazard Arabic. "Curfew! You fucking Arabush!"

Suddenly Lia didn't care about the blinding light or the rifles. She walked forward, heat rising to her cheeks.

I'll show you Arabush, you shit stain.

Depending how it was said and by whom, the term was just about the worst racial taunt used on Arabs in Israel. This fellow meant it as the equivalent of "sand nigger."

Three feet away from the three rifle barrels, she opened her outside jacket pocket and with two fingers took out her ID. The holographic IDF seal shone back at the guards. They lowered their weapons.

Lia still zeroed in on the tall, aggressive ginger soldier. He reminded her of someone.

"Check it out," she said, controlling her rising anger. "I'm an active-duty officer. Surprise! These are my guests. She's a citizen too, and her husband is from America."

"Huh, okay," the carrot top said sullenly in Hebrew. "But there's still curfew on for everyone. It's a Red Dawn martial law lockdown if you haven't heard."

She read his name from the inside of the helmet dangling at his waist: Pignataro. Lia knew the family from grade school. There was a whole raft of them. They were Jews from Italy. In school, they got heckled for being Italian, having red hair, and their really unkosher-sounding family name. In response to the bullying they received, they passed it on down to smaller kids. Their favorite victims: Arab Christians like Lia.

"You flame-headed bag of reservist crap," Lia yelled as the other two

guardsmen backed away. “Pay attention. I’m *Lieutenant* Baumann of the regular IDF. I outrank all of you clumsy putzes, especially you, Private Pignataro.”

She poked him in his flak jacket, sending him backward. “My great-grandfather was a Bedouin prince. He was with the Haganah fighting the British when your grandfather was on the streets of Milan sucking schlong for spare change. So what you wanna do, Pignataro?”

While Lia’s outburst made the checkpoint guards suddenly feel the need to be more polite, they were still ignorant.

“You can pass, but we’re not authorized to tell you the best route to get to Jerusalem,” said the corporal who she had helped out with the grieved Hasidic car owner. “It’s classified.”

“I’m sure it is. Run my ID, and you’ll see I report to General Ponyri at the Intelligence Directorate. I’m on a classified mission, and I’m ordering you to help me.”

“Again, really sorry, the system’s out, Lieutenant Baumann, ma’am.”

After more checkpoint dawdling, the best they could do was mark the route they remembered from the last time the computers were working. Eitan produced a giveaway tourist map stamped “Pizza Hut.” It had a camel picture on the Negev and a cartoon image of the Dome of the Rock at Jerusalem.

The corporal scribbled on it with a Sharpie. “It might be different now,” the soldier said, “but that’s what we have from the last update.”

Pignataro sulked by the dragon’s teeth roadblock.

“Thanks,” Lia said, nodding to the other losers. “Keep control of those guys. You’re in charge. If they shoot someone they’re not supposed to, you’ll be in the court-martial dock alongside them.”

“Yes, uh, ma’am.”

Lia got in the car before the reservist soldier could untangle his webbing to attempt a salute.

Eitan was smirking. Steph looked out the window. Spencer looked shell-

shocked but impressed.

“Lia,” the American said, “you realize you just charged at three guys with assault rifles?”

Steph turned around. “Was your great-grandfather really a prince?”

“Yup,” Lia said, putting the car in gear. “Too bad Bedouins don’t believe in owning land. However, David did make out pretty well with my dowry. He’s got a nice herd of camels anytime he wants to claim them.”

Eitan finally cracked up laughing. “‘On the streets of Milan sucking schlong for spare change!’ I gotta use that. Too bad I can’t post the video. It’s as good as that classic where the Arab girl slaps the checkpoint soldiers.”

Lia made sure they were all strapped in and sped off down the unlit streets. Silently, she exhaled.

Of all the fucking people, she thought, it just had to be a Pignataro.

22

NUCLEAR BUNKER NEGEV DESERT

DAVID

To David, his brother's request seemed like the real-life version of the dumbest question on an IDF ethics quiz:

What do you do when your (adoptive) brother (whom you've almost always had issues with) asks for your help to steal Israel's oldest atomic bomb?

David did not move. He was not going to knock his brother out without first getting to the bottom of whatever this was.

"Help me tie up this guard." Boaz fiddled inexpertly with a zip tie. "She might wake up."

"Let me guess, all this time you've been a mole for Jemaah Islamiyah, and you need a nuke to declare Balinese independence," David said. He was still stunned by the turn of events inside the nuclear fortress but was determined not to show it. "As your accomplice, I want half the celestial virgins you've been promised."

Boaz gave up his efforts with the zip tie and slumped against the Spider and started sobbing.

"It's all gone wrong. With the two Army guys we left at the airport, I could have done it." He was really in despair.

His accomplice, the injured male guard, spoke up. "You idiots, get out of

here. The place will be on lockdown in eleven minutes if the next code does not get put in.”

“Thanks,” David said, then he kicked the guy unconscious.

He then tied up the female guard professionally.

“Okay. Two less things to worry about. You’d better talk fast, Boaz.”

“I need this bomb,” Boaz said, slapping the big fat Spider with his palm. “I need it to get rid of something, something no one should have. A thing that will destroy us. Israel. All of it. Just... help me.”

“You’ve got to tell me more.”

“I can’t. No time. Father said to leave you out of it. But the attack, it was all so sudden. And Yossi... She appointed me acting minister. I’m so in over my head. You’d see that if you were smarter.”

What a cock! David thought. Yet it was the casually delivered insult that convinced him Boaz was not insane and did not need to be put in his own set of handcuffs. So if his brother was not crazy, there had to be more to all this. “The rabbi knows about this?”

Boaz nodded. “Some... uh, most.”

“And the prime minister?”

Boaz looked at him.

David was tired of being a dumb blunt instrument. But he could see desperation in his brother’s face. Boaz was at the end of his rope. He was hiding something, but it wasn’t something he was going to let go of in the eight minutes they had left.

David had to choose between being locked in here and under arrest for the rest of the war or helping his brother blindly and possibly helping Israel and Lia.

“No, I won’t help you,” David said, shaking his head with deliberate finality. “Whatever it is, we can fix it another way. These weapons, they’re what the End Times are made of.”

Boaz must have realized he could not overpower him. His posture seemed

to completely collapse. “I know,” he said breathlessly. “We’re there.”

From his sleeve, Boaz produced a key card; he put it in a slot on the bomb. Some lights glowed green, and he punched: 0, 7, לְאַפְשֵׁר ENABLE. He’d armed the Spider. The countdown was set for seven minutes.

“Turn that off.”

His idiot bother was going to kill every innocent soldier in the facility and wipe out a good part of Israel’s defense.

“You can turn it off,” David said, staring at the precious seconds clicking away on the old-style analog display. “Can’t you?”

Boaz’s recent actions did not speak well about his ability to plan ahead.

“I can. But I won’t, not until this bomb is on the hyperloop tram.”

Blackmail did have a way of clarifying ethical dilemmas. David looked around. There was a supply tunnel at the other end of the warehouse.

“Boy, they better extend the Day of Atonement into an entire week for us.”

There was a pneumatic dolly that fit under the Spider’s pallet. He slotted it in place and pumped it up.

“How do we get it out of here?”

As it turned out, the breeze David had felt was coming from a small underground subway system. The IDF had been building tunnels all through Israel and the Occupied Territories. David had not realized they connected to these secret facilities.

Moving the Spider was not hard; keeping it level while getting it on the first tram car without dropping it was. Boaz also grabbed the small suitcase nuke. They wheeled the ticking Spider along a narrow track.

“This is how we shift the strategic defense from one site to another,” Boaz said. “There is no chance of satellite surveillance. Keeps the Iranians guessing.”

With less than a minute to go before the threatened lockdown, Boaz put down the second nuke they were stealing, the Gamad-class suitcase bomb, and hunched over the tram controls. He punched in a destination.

Unauthorized deployment of Israel's nukes? The madness of it was making David's head spin. He tried to focus on making the heist a success. No matter what their differences had been, he had to trust his brother.

"What about the guards?" David asked. "They'll raise the alarm. No matter what else is going on, Shin Bet and IDF will devote all the resources they can to tracking us."

Boaz smiled wanly. "It's all arranged. Once we're gone, our man in the control room will lock the facility down from above. You've seen the place. It will take days before anyone finds out. By then it'll be over, one way or another."

What will be over?

"David," Boaz said, looking at a locking mechanism on the train, "this door key looks corroded. Take the one from the next car over. Just yank it off the chain, please."

As soon as David stepped inside the next car, he felt the kinetic stunner on the back of his neck. He'd fallen for it.

Crap.

The percussive hammer hit his nerve cluster with a thunk. He felt himself flop to the floor like a jellyfish. He was conscious but could not move a muscle.

"Sorry, David," Boaz said, leaning down and grabbing David's sleeve. "My car is going west to Gaza. Yours will be headed north to the end of the line, to Golan."

Boaz zip-tied his limp wrist to the center pole. As the door hissed closed, his brother looked at him.

"I know you killed Yossi," he said. "I forgive you."

David blacked out.

23

BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AND PKK-HELD TERRITORY TURKEY

ELLIE

Ellie was certain she would never have nightmares again. Her real life was making imagined terrors laughable.

“Captain Attic—” she whispered, and a broad hand immediately clamped over her lips. Despite gunpowder residue on Atticus’s hand, the sensation was not altogether disagreeable.

They were crouched in the underbrush, away from the open pit mine. Night hung over the PKK terrorist outpost, which had just been stormed by her very unexpected but infinitely welcome rescue team. A few shacks were illuminated by a small fire. Unmolested by firefighters of any sort, its flames grew inside the building where she had been held prisoner. On the far side was the deep gorge and an empty blackness. Burning scraps of her former co-prisoner were down there.

Poor Mr. Borkin!

He had died saving them from being blown up by the hateful local warlord.

Atticus gently pushed her hair away from her face and slipped a monocle eyepiece over her head. Through the night-vision lens, she saw the need for caution. The hill was crawling with PKK men. They seemed to know exactly where they were going, though they did not have night-vision gear.

Once in a while they would flick on flashlights. Only for an instant, then they would move again, searching.

Ellie panicked. What would those people do if they caught them now? Her mother's grandfather had been tortured during the building of the Burma Death Railway. By the look of things, the PKK 301 were more torturers than builders.

What are we going to do? Ellie mouthed.

Even with green bifocal lenses on, Atticus looked calm and reassuring. He nodded toward Sergeant Bryan, the pale man with what looked like glowing blue contact lenses. Bryan's skin was the same as a famous fashion model Ellie had met once, an African albino. He was deploying small drones. They took off silently.

They did not stay silent for long.

"I got a turdbag in my sights!" one of the drones shouted.

It hovered over a bush about one hundred meters away. It was Atticus's voice, certainly, but coming from a speaker on the flying contraption.

Ellie ducked at the *crack-crack-crack* of gunfire. Then she realized it was also part of the decoy soundtrack.

"You get him?" Bryan's voice came from one of the other flyers.

"Dunno. Let's get out of here!"

With elegant hopping coordination, the drones moved steadily away from where Ellie, Atticus, and the others were hiding. The local militia were drawn away. They continued their escape.

At the bottom of a hill, three stealthy-looking all-terrain vehicles waited. So did Mr. Perdix, the scientific wanker Ellie had met at the American embassy in Ankara. She was just about to become very cross with him when she noticed he now had three eyes.

Two of them were compact night-vision goggles; the third was floating on a halo-like rail around his head and gave him a sideways and backward view. His long delicate hands clutched a shotgun-type weapon. Ellie suspected it

was loaded with something more destructive than the nonlethal stunning rounds Sarge Bryan had used on her PKK kidnappers.

When Mr. Perdix saw her, he whispered, "Oh, thank goodness!"

She had no idea he cared. To be honest, it was a little creepy. Then she realized he was staring at her handbag.

"Give it here."

Ellie handed him her bag. Despite its small size, it had cost a fortune. She wondered if she could put in for reimbursement with the Foreign Office.

"There you are." Mr. Perdix pulled out Mr. Borkin's Celestial Night Montblanc, the one she had stolen from his office.

"Pretty fast thinking on your part, Ms. Sato," Atticus said, handing her back the bag. "If you hadn't kept that on you, we wouldn't have had a clue how to track you through that mine complex."

What's he talking... Oh.

With a start, Ellie realized she must have put the nib-size sticker on *her* own pen and then left Mr. Borkin's pen on his desk. She had stolen her own decoy pen. It must have some doohickey electronics inside that enabled them to track her.

"Ah, yes," she started to explain.

If she told the truth, these men might not respect her in the future. Time for some alternative facts.

"Elementary, really. As soon as those PKK people burst into Mr. Borkin's office, I knew the game was afoot. I surmised there might be some sort of gadget inside the decoy you gave me at the embassy..."

"My muon-decay oscillator," Mr. Perdix said, putting the device in a padded case.

"Yes, the muon device," Ellie said knowingly, thinking Muons sounded like a brand of shoes. "The evildoers would of course relieve me of any hidden electronics. I gambled they would at least allow a reporter to keep her writing instrument."

“Captain, we have to move,” the pale giant Sergeant Bryan with the glowing blue eyes said.

“Is... are you...”

“An albino? Yes, ma’am,” Bryan said in a friendly tone. “It ain’t catchin’.”

“He’s got built-in night vision that never runs out of batteries,” Atticus said, gesturing to the two other men and a small simian. “I think you’ve met Corporal Singh.”

He was the man outside the hotel in Ankara.

“Only briefly,” said Ellie. “I might not have recognized you without your monkey.”

The smaller wiry man made clicking sounds. “Stay close, Marwood.” His sidekick came scampering onto his shoulders.

“They all insisted on coming after you,” Atticus said. “It was our damn fault you were in the factory when the PKK decided to grab Borkin.”

The last man looked Asian, in an aggressive ronin samurai sort of way. He stuck his head out of one of the off-road vehicles.

“Those drones have limited batteries,” Nobu said. “When they catch one of them...”

“We’ll have really angry Kurdish separatists buzzing our way,” Atticus said. “Thank you, Mr. Nobu.”

Ellie conked her head getting into the all-terrain vehicle. She quickly reset her night-vision monocle so she could see in the pitch dark.

The three nearly silent electrics steadily jostled their way down into the moonlit Turkish valley. Ellie Sato ended up in the one driven by Mr. Perdix. She had considered him a rather limp-hearted person and was surprised to see him with Atticus and his robust gang of rescuers.

Mr. Perdix’s rotating third eye stared at her. The two-toned red iris of a floating camera lens aimed at her from only a few inches away. She wished he would just watch where he was driving along the rutted path. Through her monocle, she could see it was meant for goats, not for cars.

“How did you manage to keep the tracking device after they snatched you? You must have been searched,” Perdix asked.

“I’m very persuasive,” Ellie said curtly. “If you hadn’t barged in, I’m sure I could have talked my way out. Please watch the road with all your eyes.”

The red iris slowly slid around to the other side of Mr. Perdix’s head. Ellie just had time to settle into the very *thinly* upholstered seats when the dashboard flung up and hit her under the chin. The whole vehicle was lifted off the ground.

A sound followed, and a thump of air like a punch on her chest. The ATV pitched back and sideways, landing nearly upside down on the roadside. She wound up on top of Mr. Perdix.

“IED!” was all her driver gasped before he passed out.

Ellie opened her mouth to ask what that was. Liquid spewed out of her mouth, hot and sticky. All she could manage to think was: *I BIT MY TONGUE OFF!*

24

NEAR TEL AVIV

LIA

The night that fell over Israel's second-largest city held a brittle quiet. In her bones, Lia could tell it was a city under siege.

But from what enemy? From what direction? Maybe no one knew yet. Israel would win. They always had. The question was: how much death and devastation would be the price this time?

The headlights of Lia's car prodded at the darkness. Half the streetlights were out. At intersections, only red lights flashed or none at all.

Stephanie was the most quiet. She, more than any of them, knew the dangers third-class citizen Muslim Arabs faced during alerts. Even if they drove a car with yellow plates, the radio chips in the passports and ID cards of Muslims tagged them as a higher threat level than Jews, Druze, or Christians.

Lia followed the route hastily sketched out on the Pizza Hut tourist map. It didn't have all the streets, but she knew where to make turns. In the distance, something flashed. The starburst of light was followed by a dry crack.

"Hey, is that rain?" Spencer said with that weird American optimism Lia was learning to expect from her old friend's new husband.

They were close to Ben Gurion Airport. Instead of the usual runway lights, sudden jagged lines of neon lit up the air above the dark horizon. It was

man's thunder, not heaven's.

"Iron rain, maybe," Eitan said with pimply faced bravado.

He was right. On the horizon, another starburst barrage erupted silently. Lia recognized it as an Iron Dome antimissile launch. The delayed sonic rumbles made the sight that much more ominous.

"What do you think it is?" Steph said.

"Maybe someone shelling the airport with longer-range rockets," Lia said. "We'll find the launch bases and stop them. We always do."

They always had.

She swerved faster than she had to onto a roundabout. People and things in the car slid to one side. They were finally on Route 1. Jerusalem was not just a dot on a map. After the aborted call from her parents, it had become a goal that drew her like a magnet.

Lia drove around a corner. The savage rambling fireworks display became hidden behind patches of night shaped like trees.

At the next checkpoint, they were waved through pretty quickly. Highway 1 was a nice, flat, divided route. Most importantly, it went to Jerusalem without straying over the Green Line barriers into the Annexed and Occupied Territories. While they would cross the 1949 A.M.stice Line, that was meaningless. The territory had been annexed to Israel like the Golan Heights. There were still Arab towns like Kharbatha al-Misbah in the area; however, those were surrounded by security fences and walls.

After the Ben Shemin Interchange, she had the urge to floor the accelerator. At top speed, they were only twenty minutes away, if the road was clear. On either side of the modern highway, clumps of trees and bushes lurked. Any of them could be hiding an ambush gang or a fat canister of explosives. They entered a short tunnel under an overpass, then came out the other side only a second later.

She cursed and braked suddenly. Kilometers in front of them, something big was burning. Lia pulled over and doused all the lights. She made sure not

even the door lights would come on.

“I’d tell you to stay in the car,” she said, unlatching her rifle, “but that doesn’t seem to work with you.”

“I can shoot,” Eitan offered.

“Yeah, yourself, in the foot.”

Lia had taken them here. It didn’t seem right not to allow them weapons. Steph hated guns.

“How about you, Spencer?”

“I’m from Utah, a Stand Your Ground state. Banks give you a pistol when you open an account. But I’ve never shot a real person before.”

She gave him a sidearm.

Lia moved up higher on the shoulder of the road and knelt in the gravel. Her Tavor rifle had really a good sight, with auto zoom and various sensors. Up ahead, it looked like a bulldozer had plowed through the Green Line from the unannexed Territories side into Israel. To create the devastation like that, the dozer would had to have been five hundred meters wide and spewing napalm in all directions. Nothing other than a saturation bombing air raid could have knocked down that length of twenty-five-foot concrete separation barriers. Nothing that she had ever heard of.

Unless the rifle’s heat vision was malfunctioning, spots along the road ahead were 500°C. The ground had absorbed a huge amount of heat and was spewing it up, boiling the asphalt. There was no one around. No Israelis, no enemy, just lumps of various sizes. Vehicles? Bodies?

“We have to go another way.”

No one argued.

Lia quickly thought of other ways to get to Jerusalem.

There was the automated hyperloop transit system. Most of it was underground and reserved for Israelis only. Just one blockage in the tunnel, and they would be stuck. During Red Dawn, it was probably shut down.

There were heliports and flying car drones. If the Iron Dome and David’s

Sling air defenses were active, the airport had to be on ground stop. Anything in the air might become a target for Israeli missiles.

Lia got back in the car.

She had screwed up big time. Taking Steph, Spencer, and Eitan had been a mistake. To drop them off anywhere safe would take hours and then soldiers might never let her back through the checkpoints to get to Jerusalem. She resolved to drop them at the nearest Green Line Wall garrison.

“So?” Stephanie said with suspicion.

“No problem,” Lia said with a smile she hoped did not look too fake. “We’ll backtrack and go through the Occupied Territories.”

“Really?” Spencer said enthusiastically. “We haven’t been there yet. I wish it was day.”

...

The wall came up faster than Lia expected.

Lia steered the car around a small outcropping, its outline lost in the starlit sky. Razor-wire fencing a half dozen layered coils deep and kilometers long led up to the concrete barrier.

On this side, people might be divided into three classes, but they could pretend it was not so. Across the line that separated established Israel from the conquered hinterland, the zone of military occupation, no pretending was possible. Over there, people were strictly separated into Jews and stateless non-citizens.

“Whoa,” Spencer said, suddenly realizing he was not going to a sterner version of Disneyland.

“It’s a lot nicer in the day,” Steph said sarcastically.

“Oh yeah, the paintings of flowers and aqueducts really give me warm fuzzy feelings,” Eitan said. “On our side. I’ve never seen it from the other.”

A robot at a car turnstile read the tag on their plate. A flashing green arrow ushered them into the “Jews and allies” queue. Lia had never been put in the Arab line in her life. Her ID papers said “Arab – Christian – active IDF.”

The dark slabs of the Wall loomed closer.

“Is this normal?” Spencer asked. “Where is everyone?”

Besides some broken and abandoned cars and pushcarts, the place was empty, desolate. Lia had never seen any checkpoint like it. At major crossings into the West Bank, the Arab lines were tucked behind some berms so Israelis did not have to look at them. On a busy day, they stretched for kilometers. Night and day, there was always a queue.

“Nothing to worry about. It’s mostly automated,” Lia said. “This will be fast.”

It was not.

The final gate was unattended and locked down. This was worse than dealing with a stubborn guard. Lia resisted the urge to slam her fist on the dash.

“I’m going to find some help,” she said. “Stay in the car, please.”

Spencer looked up at the gun slits peering down at them from the massive turrets of the guard towers. “No problemo.”

She approached the concrete guard bunker with her hands out, holding her identity papers. During university holidays, Lia had worked fixing mechBrains inside some of these border systems. She knew they could read her papers while they were inside her pocket from up to a mile away. This was just in case there were humans on duty.

“Shalom? Hello?”

No response.

That was crazy. She looked through the six-inch blast-resistant glass. There was a cup with a tea bag still in it. The liquid had turned dark brown.

It was possible the guards assigned to this post could have been called away for some massive emergency and left the automated systems in charge. Which would mean the gate to the West Bank was closed. Which was impossible because she was getting to Jerusalem that night. She was.

Where’s Miss Aleph when you need her?

She went into the gate-control turret. Her own IDF security code got her through the first doorway. The first steel door squeaked on its hinges and clicked shut. Only then did the other door at the end of the passageway open.

She was in the room with the abandoned teacup. She felt it. Lukewarm. How could a place go to shit just like that?

She linked her handheld device to the gatehouse operating system. No response to her input codes. The guards had sealed the gate from the Israel side and left.

In frustration she jammed the mobile handset into her pocket. The plastic case made a small *tink* sound. The Eye of Horus locket. It had belonged to the former Minister Yossi and had Ministry of Defense code on it. It was worth a try.

She plugged the Egyptian eye-shaped locket into the nearest nano USB port. It automatically started querying the checkpoint's mechBrain for password screens.

A *ka-ching* noise behind her made Lia jump and whirl around.

Then she laughed to herself. The cash register had popped open. A few dusty bills fluttered inside. Next, the door to the toilet unlocked by itself. Then the way she had come in flashed green. Finally, with a great rumbling of hydraulics, the main gate through the Wall opened.

Her road chums were impressed.

Lia got back in the car. "No problem, if you know how."

They drove through. When they were less than a hundred meters down the Jewish-only road into the occupied lands, the gate's green light turned amber, and a siren sounded. Amber turned red. Gears deep within the Wall groaned. The fissure through which they had entered sealed behind them.

...

At the first interchange, Lia went north. Minutes later, their sensible hybrid car was rolling down Route 443.

Route 443 followed a route that dated back to the oldest books of the

Bible. People had taken note. People with money and permits to put up billboards along the road.

“Golly, what’s that about?”

The first one said simply:

Welcome to Beth Horon.

Captured and made part of GREATER ISRAEL in 166 B.C. by Judah Maccabee and again in 66 A.D. by Simon Bar-Giora and again in 1967 A.D. by Moshe Dayan.

Sponsored by Christians for the Supremacy of Zion (Michigan Chapter)

“The government lets evangelical Christians from America put up signs,” Lia explained.

“Uh, sorry, I guess,” the lone American on the trip said.

“As long as they don’t directly incite violence and are only put up along Israeli-only roads, they’re allowed.”

“Freaken Evangelicals,” Steph said. “As if this place doesn’t have enough conflicting religions already.”

Right-wing Christians in the USA have more members and political clout than American Jews. They also tend to be more receptive to the message of ultranationalist Zionists and messianic Orthodox in Israel.

“We studied that in civics class,” Eitan said. “The Palestinian Authority filed a protest when the Christian Zionists posted certain passages on billboards. It was from the Book of Numbers, where Moses tells the Israelites to kill all the Arab Midianite men, execute their wives and their male children, but keep their virgin girls as sex slaves.”

“Oh yeah, the Slaughter of Midian,” Spencer, the formerly devout Mormon, said. The man knew his scripture. “Even for the Old Testament, that was a bit harsh. My bishop at home says you have to take some passages of the Book really figuratively.”

The next sign came up:

The soldiers of Israel asked: How shall we be able, being so few, to fight against so great a multitude and so strong, seeing we are ready to faint with fasting all this day?

The next read:

He answered: For the victory of battle standeth not in the multitude of a host; but strength cometh from heaven. They come against us in much pride and iniquity to destroy us, and our wives and children, and to spoil us.

The final one had the most bullet holes in it.

But we fight for our lives and our laws. Wherefore the Lord himself will overthrow them before our face: and as for you, be ye not afraid of them.

“That’s not so bad,” Spencer said optimistically.

Eitan sipped a celery soda, put his feet on the dashboard, and said, “Yes, I feel peace breaking out any second now.”

**BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AND PKK-HELD TERRITORY
TURKEY****ELLIE**

I've bloody well bit my tongue off. If that doesn't just take the biscuit!

Ellie Sato had spent the moments before the explosion ruminating on how lucky she was to be rescued from the horrid PKK 301 terror cell. She also wondered how easy it might be to change cars and ride with Captain Atticus instead of Mr. Perdix, who smelled like liniment.

With a flash and a thundering explosion, the world she was viewing through her night-vision monocle vanished. The dashboard of their small all-terrain vehicle hit her chin. The car had tumbled. Her head hit the side window, again, and a third time before the rolling stopped. Then she hung in her seatbelt, drooling on Mr. Perdix, who was beneath her, apparently unconscious.

Did electric cars catch fire or explode? She had to get the door open but had no idea how the latches on the door or her seat straps worked.

While she was trying to determine what part of herself she had bit through and if it was still in her mouth, the roof popped open. The red beam of a flashlight appeared.

Corporal Singh leaned through, fanning away clouds of dust. "Please remain calm, Ms. Sato."

Indians were always so polite. His capuchin monkey Marwood did a chin-up on the doorframe and also looked to be assessing the damage.

“Let me examine any injury you might have.”

“Gaa,” she mumbled, careful to keep track of any chunks they might be able to sew back on.

Ellie clambered out, trying not to step on Mr. Perdix too hard.

“Ith okay.” Her cheek was vigorously swelling where it had hit the doorframe, yet thankfully, her tongue still worked and seemed to be its usual length.

The lead ATV was completely destroyed and unusable. Atticus and Sarge were standing next to it, pulling supplies off the roof rack while being wary of it rolling over and crushing them. One of the wheels had been blown off, and the other one looked like it had been chewed down to the rim.

“What happened?” Sarge Bryan started prying open Mr. Nobu’s side of the damaged car’s door. “You had the booby-trap sensors on max. We were going at your pace.”

“That was no ordinary IED,” Nobu said. “The countermeasures barely reacted in time to knock down the incoming ordnance.”

Ellie gathered their vehicles could sense and intercept rockets and things hurled at them. For the most part, that seemed to have worked.

Atticus looked grim. “Only Turkish regular forces have sophisticated road mines like this,” he said. “They must be on high alert because of Kurdish independence and the fifteen million Kurds in Turkey who would like to join the new country.”

“Whap does that mean?” Ellie asked, her curiosity overcoming the pain caused by speaking.

“Simply put, ma’am,” Sarge Bryan said, scanning the dark with his strange electric-blue glowing eyes, “we can’t count on the Turkish army not to shoot us when we try to cross the border.”

After making sure everyone had their limbs attached and wits about them,

their remaining two vehicles set off. Atticus and Bryan walked ahead.

Ellie took a moment, washed goop out of her mouth with some water, also expelling an inch-wide patch of skin from the inside of her cheek. She decided it would be more painful to try wadding in some likely less-than-sanitary tissue paper and just let the wound continue oozing blood into her mouth.

That taken care of, she gripped the steering wheel of the resilient second ATV and followed Atticus. Mr. Perdix had become too dizzy to drive. Corporal Singh said he might have a concussion. He advised her to keep the DARPA scientist talking.

“Deep side vision,” Mr. Perdix mumbled from the passenger seat. “That’s what we need.”

“So this Sergeant Bryan,” Ellie said, trying to steer with night-vision goggles on. “He’s got better sensors to find traps, does he?”

“Who? Oh, yes, Bryan. Good man. Total albino. Had extremely sensitive night vision even before they replaced his eyes at Shennong Center. I’d love to get a look inside his cranium.”

Atticus and Bryan kept a decent pace following what looked, in the green glow the visible world was bathed in, to still be an animal herder’s path leading up the mountain. When she had thought about what it would be like reporting from exotic foreign locations, she had imagined spending a few nights in rustic country inns. The deplorable lack of paved roads outside of large cities was a bit of a shock.

As they approached a ridge, Atticus waved his hand down.

“We gotta check over the top,” Atticus said cheerily. “Shouldn’t be a problem.”

It rapidly became a problem. Ellie could tell by the way Bryan and Atticus quickly ducked down and hastily conferred about what to do next.

“What do you think’s going on?” she whispered to her driving companion. Mr. Perdix did not answer. He just slumped sideways on her shoulder.

Oh. That's not going to do at all, she thought. He was irritating enough when he was conscious. She pushed him back upright. A medical monitor shaped like a palm-sized metal spider had fallen off Mr. Perdix. Ellie put it back on his forehead.

The digital readout read: traumatic brain injury

A tube arched down from the metal spider to reach under Mr. Perdix's nose. This appendage dispensed an ammonia-smelling spray. He snorted, woke up, and sneezed. The sneeze saved his life.

At the same instant he jerked forward, a bullet hole popped through the windscreen, showering her cheek with sharp glass shards.

"Owww," she growled. She was more angry than shocked. The third time someone shot at you, it was just irritating.

She pushed Mr. Perdix further down in his seat and ducked as the window popped again. A second bullet hole was bored into the headrest of the ATV's passenger seat.

In order to keep Mr. Perdix as low as possible, she had to leave the car. The other ATV driven by Mr. Nobu was some yards behind them. She waved her hand furiously and crawled out onto the rocky path.

"Kill him!" yelled the usually sanguine Corporal Singh as he ran past her car to meet Atticus up ahead. Ellie pulled out Mr. Perdix. He was very confused, having just woken up.

"I am *trying* to kill him," Sarge Bryan replied from up ahead by the ridge.

Ellie crawled over to where the others were. Sarge Bryan had a very complicated-looking rifle. Atticus was lying beside him, peering through binoculars, trying to spot who was shooting at them.

"One of these days, we'll get a designated sniper on our squad."

Thwap. Bryan's rifle made a sound like a twig breaking.

"He's down," Atticus said.

After a few moments Atticus said it was okay to move. Crouching low, they went back to assess the damage.

“If Mr. Perdix had been upright in his seat...” Ellie said.

“They’re definitely armed like regular Turkish,” Atticus said. He seemed unusually alarmed. This caused a chain reaction of rising hysteria in Ellie.

Mr. Nobu had a peek at the other side of the gorge through a telescope.

“They have guided missiles,” the ronin-looking Asian man said. “They know we’re here. They won’t try crossing this gorge. They’ll just pepper us with cluster bombs until they see secondary explosions. We can’t outrun that.”

“Those buggers!” Ellie snapped, outraged.

She did not know exactly what cluster bombs were, but they didn’t sound sporting. Ellie had never shot a gun in her life but honestly felt like having a go with the silenced rifle. *Cluster-bomb a reporter, will you!*

“Help me up,” Mr. Perdix said, holding his head with one hand and with the other motioning to the boot compartment of the ATV. With help, he extracted a fat black case.

“Can you get them with that?” Atticus said, sounding doubtful.

Mr. Perdix popped the lid off. Inside was a drone the size of a carry-on bag. The scientist’s hands fumbled as he tried locking the propellers in place. Nobu helped him.

“We’ll see.”

While the men were assembling their scary-looking toy, against Atticus’s advice, Ellie snuck a look over the ridgeline. There was a deep gorge. Trees made soft swishing sounds in the wind. Far below, out of sight, a river gurgled along. On the other hill opposite was a small clearing. Her night-vision range finder told her it was 1,230 meters away.

“Is there any point to signaling them that we’re friendly?” Ellie’s bloodlust had cooled a bit.

“Nope, Ms. Sato,” Atticus said. “That sniper was shooting to kill right off. They’ve made up their mind. I can’t risk taking us in under a white flag.”

Ellie sort of hoped Atticus meant he could not risk surrendering her again.

He must be beating himself up for letting her go into Borkin's office in the first place.

There was another muzzle flash, and this time she saw it out of the corner of her eye in the black night. They all ducked. Ellie found it surreal. It took a second or two after the flash for the bullet to hit high on the trunk of a tree.

"Oh, look," Ellie said. "He missed completely."

"No, he didn't," Mr. Perdix fumed as he pounded the last rotor arm in place. "That's a homing round. It will guide their missiles right to us. They don't even have to put in grid coordinates, just fire and forget."

"Right," said Nobu. "If they fire, we can forget any plans we have more than twenty seconds in the future."

Mr. Perdix's fat drone took off. It headed straight for the enemy position across the gorge.

"Keep it steady." He had reluctantly handed the controller over to Nobu.

"You may want to look away," Atticus advised.

She chose not to. She zoomed in with her optics. Their drone dove in and hovered. She thought it had better do something dangerous before they shot it down.

"It's not working," Sarge Bryan exclaimed, checking the magazine of his rifle. "They're getting ready to launch missiles at us."

"Wait for it," Mr. Perdix said. He sounded happy. It was quite chilling. "Right now, all they feel is a damp mist in the air. Some of them might notice the smell of hydrolyzed aluminum and thermite."

The vapor cloud grew in size over the enemy position.

A second later, the opposite hillside erupted in flame. She felt a sudden flare of heat on her face. The shockwave rustled the trees round them.

"Now," Mr. Perdix said, "they don't feel anything at all. The overpressure blast was sufficient to dismember and debone a human body. You have Adaptive Execution's DARPA guarantee on that."

Mr. Perdix took the controller back and placed it into the empty case.

“That was a jury-rigged thermobaric fuel-air device,” Atticus explained grimly. “The drone sprayed highly flammable liquid into the air and then set off an incendiary explosion which set the vapors on fire.”

“Also known as ‘vacuum bombs,’ thermobarics are second only to nuclear weapons in destructive capacity.”

Mr. Perdix closed the case lid and pulled a cord. It began to smoke, presumably destroying all the electronics inside. He left it behind a rock.

He needn’t have bothered hiding it. They were about to leave both their remaining ATVs behind.

“Ground into that gorge is too steep,” Atticus declared, his voice inspiring confidence no matter how dire the message. “There’s been a recent washout on this side of the hill. We’ll have to keep going on foot.”

Nobu sighed. “I’ll break out the MULEs.”

26

JUDEA & SAMARIA / WEST BANK

LIA

“Eitan, you got any more of that celery soda?”

“Can’t you Americans go five minutes without junk food?” Steph asked her husband.

“I’m not stopping for pee breaks,” Lia warned.

“You’ll have to use the Arab portable toilet,” Eitan said, picking an empty can from the floor of the car and passing it to the back seat. He noticed Steph.

“Oh, ah, sorry.”

“It’s not the worst thing we’ve heard tonight,” Steph said.

That was all the encouragement Eitan needed. “Why do Jews take an instant dislike to Palestinians?”

Lia slapped the steering wheel. The last thing this treacherous road trip needed was Eitan the aspiring comedian.

Steph shrugged. “I’ve been oppressed for five generations. I don’t mind. But on the way back, we tell only Jewish jokes.”

That settled, Eitan repeated his question.

“I don’t know,” Lia said.

“Because we Jews are a very busy people. It saves time.”

Steph jabbed Eitan in the shoulder. “I got a better one. What is the most popular Palestinian wine in the Occupied Territories?”

None of them had a clue.

“‘I want my land back!’” Steph said.

Even Spencer groaned.

“I got another one,” Eitan said. “Why was the Palestinian late for work?”

“This better not be dirty,” Lia cautioned. “Spencer is a Mormon, which is like a Christian Orthodox.”

“Why was the Palestinian late?” Steph asked.

“Because there was a power failure, and he got stuck on the *escalator*.”

Spencer uttered a nervous chuckle. That sound was cut off when the road exploded under their car.

Lia felt all four tires blow out at once. The steering wheel jerked against her hands. Pain shot up her arms as her thumbs got twisted the wrong way. The car spun sideways. Sparks came up from the trailing edge. They skidded to a stop.

Eitan pulled at the door handle and looked at the rifle.

Lia yanked his hands away. This was a planned ambush. They had run over professionally laid road spikes. Those had been undetectable, positioned to do all four tires at once and then jam into the wheel wells to halt even “run flat” type tires. Pros would be close by.

“Keep your hands above the windows,” Lia said as calmly as she could. “Just wait.”

“For what?”

The two front doors had their locks drilled and ripped off. They flung open. Rifle barrels came poking in. They did not fire. As David might say, that was a good start.

“Hands clear of weapons!” a rough-sounding male voice said in moderately bad Hebrew. Could these be Palestinian cops hoping to catch Arab bandits?

“I’m IDF on official business,” Lia said as calmly as she could. “Let me go now, and we’ll fix this.”

Their car was totaled. Eitan, Steph, and especially Spencer were scared out of their minds.

“Out of car. Go, now!”

“It’s okay, everyone,” Lia said. “Keep your hands visible and move slowly. Don’t touch their rifle barrels, even by accident.”

“No talking!”

Flashing through Lia’s mind were images from years ago of two IDF reservists who took a wrong turn and ended up in a Ramallah police station. A lynch mob got hold of them. The two Jewish men were gutted and their bodies thrown from the second-story window of the police station. One of the killers had appeared in the window, proudly showing off palms dripping with blood, smiling a wide, happy butcher’s smile. That happened near here.

“Just take it easy,” Lia said in Arabic, easing herself out of the door. The tires were flat, and the bottom of the door scraped on the ground.

Steph knew the drill. She had relatives in the Territories and had been made to kneel on roadside gravel many times. When they were all lined up with their hands on top of their heads, another guy came up behind them. Lia smelled cigar smoke.

David was always telling her it was important to take the initiative. That sounded fine when she was battling with fellow geek computer programmers over code syntax. Lia had brought her friends here, to this dark and lonely roadside in the Occupied Territories, on the wrong side of the Wall. There was nothing to stop their captors from giving them each a bullet in the back of their heads. It was harder to be assertive.

“Excuse me,” Lia said in Arabic. “I presume you are the man in charge.”

Stones dug into her knees; a chin with dark stubble appeared right beside her face. She tried not to panic.

“Why do you say?” a man with hot tobacco-smelling breath asked.

“That is expensive-smelling smoke.”

After a pause, instead of a pistol cocking, Lia heard a chuckle. “Please,

everyone turn around and be seated.”

Lia translated for Spencer. She could hear Steph’s teeth chattering. It was best she just concentrated on being a quiet and demure Arab woman.

The man Lia faced was younger than she expected. He seemed fit and wore an officer’s uniform. The good news was his badge was from the regular Palestinian Security Service, PSS. Those were the good guys, relatively speaking. The less-good guys, who you did not want to meet, were the “special security” PSF service, aka: Death Squad.

On the other hand, he still had his sidearm drawn.

“Buongiorno,” Lia said on a hunch.

The PSS officer relaxed and holstered his weapon with a prideful embarrassment typical of Arab men.

“You speak Italian?”

“Probably not as much as you,” she said. Lia wanted to put them on notice that they were not just random tourists passing by ready to be robbed during a crisis. Therefore she mentioned something not many Israelis would know: that the PA security services were trained by the Italian Carabinieri at Jericho.

He motioned for his three officers to stand down. “I am Capitan Mikhail, from Ramallah.”

“You’ve got our IDs, so I’ll skip the introductions,” Lia said. That name rang a bell. There was a crucifix showing under Mikhail’s open shirt. “If you have an uplink, you can confirm my IDF status. Under Military Order No. 34, I officially request you replace the transport you accidentally damaged. We have to get to Jerusalem.”

Mikhail’s expression turned grim. “There is no uplink. No one sane is going to Jerusalem this night. Come.”

They were ushered to a hastily erected command center a dozen meters away. Lia noticed the soldiers’ uniforms were dirty. All of them had some kind of injury. Mikhail tried to keep his left hand behind him. It was

bandaged, probably missing a finger or two.

“Mikhail,” Lia said, sitting down on a folding chair. “Now I remember the name. Any relation to the famous mayor of Ramallah?”

“Are you Catholic?”

“Akasheh Bedouin.”

“Ah, of course. No one else would remember. No one else would care.”

“Their loss.” Janet Mikhail was the first elected mayor of Ramallah after thirty years of that position being appointed by the Israeli military governors of the Occupied Territories. She was also the first and only woman to hold the post.

“She is my great-aunt,” the Palestinian said. “You must be thirsty from your long drive.”

“Forget it.”

Screw hospitality. She had to maintain her authority and the initiative. Despite them being ambushed and disarmed, Lia was Israeli, which meant these people had to obey her under martial law. Everything she had seen and heard made her want to get to her parents in the capital more than ever. There was no time for a drawn-out tea service. She shut the tent flap after her friends were inside. Lia could be assertive. For damaging their vehicle and kidnapping them, Mikhail and his men could get twenty years hard labor in an Israeli prison.

“No bullshit. What’s going on?”

Mikhail collapsed into his chair. He laid his arm painfully on his desk. Three finger stumps were bleeding through the white bandages.

“If I knew that, I’d know who I want to kill.”

The tent flap ripped open.

“Bold talk,” said a voice in harsh Arabic. The man spoke from the dark outside. “From a dead man!”

Lia reached for... nothing. They had taken all her weapons, even her small knife. It would not have mattered. The gaunt man with bulging eyes who

entered was cradling something in his left hand, which had to be a bomb.

His right hand was on an arming lever.

“Raem,” Mikhail said, rising from his chair. “What are you doing? Put that down.”

“Shut up! You no longer give orders, you Christian pig collaborator with Jews. The Grey Wolves have come. You and your filth will be devoured or left to rot in the dirt.”

“You are talking nonsense,” Mikhail said.

The traitors among Mikhail’s people had the drop on them. Spencer, Steph, and Eitan got pushed deeper into the tent. Through the slit in the tent entrance, Lia could see them detaining Mikhail’s loyalists. They were giving this area a wide berth, expecting the explosion of a suicide bomb any moment.

“Real change is coming,” Raem said. “When the Jewish oppressors realize it, it will be too late for them.”

Lia was sure Spencer could not understand a word being said. He didn’t need to. Everyone knew what a suicide bomber looked like. Eitan stood very still.

“Raem, whatever they’ve told you,” Mikhail said, “whatever they’ve promised, it’s a lie. If we just help the Israelis keep the peace, we’ll have our own state one day—”

“Shut up! For one hundred years and longer, way back to the Ottomans, that’s been the shit jammed down our throats. Worst of all, by our own corrupt leaders.” Raem’s hands trembled, not in fear, but with eagerness to detonate. “I am only grateful my death as a Shahid martyr will be one small paving stone on the way to the Grey Wolves’ victory.”

“What are you saying? You’re a Christian like me.”

“Not for months. Not since I heard whispers of *his* coming. Not since I met him!” Raem looked at the device bulging out of the pouch strapped around his waist. “This is his fiery sword Zulfiqar. Aga Temir gave me this one

personally. He said ‘use it well,’ and I will...”

Lia felt her face scrunch up involuntarily. Images all Israelis knew well flashed through her mind, pictures of ragged clothes with pulped flesh inside them, school buses blown apart with small dismembered hands fused to seats.

“Wait!” Mikhail said, with more authority in his voice than before. “I know why you are doing this. It’s about Rachel.”

This time it was Raem’s turn to freeze in mid motion. His right hand remained on the lever. It did not look like a dead man’s switch. If Raem could be neutralized before he squeezed it...

“You... you let the Jews kill her.”

“No. She was my wife,” Mikhail said. “I did what I thought was right.”

“She died in the ambulance at the checkpoint.”

“You don’t know. Hadassah was the only place she could get help. Even our doctor said she couldn’t be helped at Ramallah. Here...”

Mikhail then did either the gutsiest or the dumbest thing she had ever heard of being done during a confrontation with a suicide bomber. With two fingers, he pulled a very sharp bayonet-style knife out of a sheath hanging from his belt.

“It’s me you hate. You wanted Rachel, maybe even loved her in your own way. Do not waste your bomb on these worthless prisoners. They are nothing. Kill me, then blow up an Israeli tank or one of the settlements on the hill.”

Mikhail laid the knife down on the table.

Holding her body stock still, Lia rehearsed a move in her mind. *Grab, step, hit.* All the while, she tried to project an image of being the most harmless worthless prisoner in the history of worthless prisoners.

Mikhail had inherited some of his great-aunt’s chutzpah and brains. Raem took his right hand off the trigger device.

Not yet, Lia thought.

As if in a dream, the aspiring martyr picked up the bayonet, stuck it under Mikhail’s chin, and pressed. Lia watched in horror. The honed black blade

went in so easily.

Now!

Lia picked up the chair and slammed it into the side of Raem's head.

However, at that exact same moment, Eitan had a similar idea. The lamp he was trying to hit Raem with met Lia's chair. The blows canceled each other out. Raem only got a mild thump to the back of his head.

He whirled in anger. Mikhail's whole body splayed back; his arm spasmed. The handle of the bayonet protruded from his chin as if glued there. He dropped back onto his desk.

Raem looked into Lia's eyes, smiled mildly, whispered something softly, and pressed the trigger of his bomb.

27

IDF HYPERLOOP TUNNEL NEAR HEBRON, JUDEA & SAMARIA

DAVID

“Dave, unless you manually countermand, I’m coming out of airplane mode in

3,

2,

1. . .

Where are we?

What’s going on?

Where is the acting minister of defense?”

For a second, David could not place the voice nagging at him from the pocket of his Sabre tactical jacket.

It did not sound like Lia.

Then he remembered. He was flex-cuffed to a handrail. The handrail was inside a small hyperloop tram. David pulled his arm. The thick plastic did not budge.

Damnit. Boaz. The Spider atom bomb. Lia. Ben Gurion Airport.

Had the world gone insane and taken his brother with it? He had to get back to Boaz. He had two of Israel’s nukes. Could the rabbi talk sense into him? He couldn’t have gotten the arming codes by himself.

David pulled again at the zip tie. His hand was already numb from being tied to the metal pole.

Speculating was useless. The tramcar was going to a pre-set destination. Golan, way up north, the end of the line. He stared at the floor, the ceiling,

the empty seats.

“Miss Aleph, stop this train car.”

“The train is not responding to wireless commands.”

“Can you tell where we are?”

“We’re traveling at one hundred and ninety kilometers per hour under the Dura Nature Reserve in the West Bank. The next station is Hebron 2.”

The ancient biblical city of Hebron was split into Arab and Jewish sections.

“The mechBrain conductor tells me it is unable to stop until its final destination is reached: the Golan Heights.”

David looked for something he could use to cut with. A wrench was sliding around on the floor. A cardboard takeout box lay in a corner. He had left his gun, knife, and multitool in the car before he went into the nuclear bomb warehouse.

“Miss Aleph, can you function without your touchscreen?”

“I can. But overall efficiency would be reduced by. . .”

David slammed the front glass of his handset down on the steel floor.

“Ouch!”

A two-inch shard came out. First, he tried to cut the locking bracket. No good. This was a military-grade prisoner restraint. Bolt cutters were the normal way to get them off.

David sawed, feeling the glass shard become blunted by the metal fibers inside the restraint. He switched the edge around. The hyperloop tram sped through the tunnel. The shaft was depressurized to reduce drag resistance. Even if the tram stopped, he could not just step outside.

One problem at a time, he thought.

When he had cut halfway through the band, the additional lubricants of sweat and blood allowed him to ease it open just enough. His hand came free.

Boaz... you’ve really done it.

“Miss Aleph, you still with me?”

“I’m a bit shaken up. There seems to be glass in my audio sensor. But for the most part, yes, Dave, I am with you.”

“How do I stop this thing?”

Hopefully stopping the maglev tram was easy.

“Any tampering with autodrive mechanisms will result in an emergency stop. We will be trapped fifty meters underground until rescue workers arrive.”

Not an option.

“So, all I have to do is cut this green hydraulic line and we’ll stop?”

“Average response time for a tunnel rescue crew is three hours. If I had my screen, we could watch Lawrence of Arabia.”

“At this speed how long a skid will this tram make until it stops?”

“Best estimate is one hundred and eighty-two meters.”

“How long is the Hebron station’s pressurized zone?”

“Twenty-five meters”

“All right. Stay connected to the tram’s mechBrain. Let me know when we have one hundred and seventy-five meters to go to Hebron station.”

“Dave, that is not recommended. An error of one tenth of a second—”

“Just tell me when to cut!”

“In four seconds. I urge you to use three of them to reconsider.”

He had just enough time to grab the wrench off the floor and with his other hand jam the green wire against the bulkhead. He hit it as hard as he could and was rewarded with a gush of foul-smelling and bitter-tasting hydraulic fluid.

A red warning light came on. They flashed in Hebrew, English, and Arabic, telling him to grab a handhold and brace.

The train decelerated. David’s body kept going. He tumbled past handholds and crashed into the emergency exit door. A red-painted handle dug yet another sore spot into his ribcage. Good news was they were really slowing down. The increased air density worked like he thought it would. If he had any breath left, he would have congratulated himself as the maglev tin can skidded to a stop at Hebron 2, trailing sparks.

“Miss Aleph?”

“Over here, Dave,” she said from under a pile of junk.

David popped the emergency hatch. He coughed and shined Miss Aleph’s top-mounted LED flashlight around. Metal-flavored dust was everywhere.

The “station” was not like one you might find in Paris or New York’s subways. It was just a short platform tucked under the arched pillars supporting the tunnel. He climbed up onto it.

His relief at no longer being on a one-way trip to the Golan Heights was cut short by the echoing sound of gunfire.

Miss Aleph was still traumatized by having her main display smashed. She spoke in a quavering voice.

“Dave, I’m hearing small-arms fire. Standard IDF rounds, heavy machine guns, and other weapons I’m not familiar with. Perhaps we should remain underground.”

David climbed the stairs up to street level.

Hebron’s history went back to the Bronze Age. Today 300,000 Arab non-citizens lived alongside 2,000 Jewish-Israeli citizen settlers. And boy, did they not like each other. The animosity was so great, the Hebron Protocol of 1997 split the city in two.

The zones were H1 (Arab) and H2 (Jewish). They were separated by walls, checkpoints, separate roads, surveillance/attack dogs, and surveillance/attack drones. The last daily briefing David had seen reported scattered rioting in the area. His thoughts were cut short by an artillery piece going off.

“A Merkava XII battle tank has fired its main gun.”

The shockwave sent dust raining down from the tunnel’s roof.

“I heard.”

David climbed up into the chaos of the Hebron battle zone and instantly got a blast of tear gas. Whichever jackwad was in charge had dropped canisters inside their own perimeter. David squinted and held his breath until he found a clear patch. When his eyes cleared, a rifle muzzle was pointed at him.

“IDF friendly!” he managed to choke out, raising his hands.

He showed his ID. The Army private glanced at it from behind the visor of his breather unit. He had spare goggles at his waist. The Israeli soldier was black, most likely an Ethiopian Jew. Like his wife’s family, they were born desert people. They had endurance for days and were tenacious fighters.

However, because they were Africans and visible minorities, cops, employers, and landlords gave them a hard time.

“*Tadyass*,” David said in Amharic. It was the equivalent of “How’s it going?”

“Pretty good, boss. Uh, sir.”

The nametag on his body armor said Zohar Taga – Turai – 933 Nahal Brigade.

Private Taga’s white teeth flashed. “I’m glad you’ve come. Cavalry to save the day, huh, sir?”

Taga was scared out of his mind and trying not to show it.

“Sit tight,” David said, trying to be reassuring. “I’m by myself for now. You know what they say: one riot, one Israeli Unit 101 ranger.”

The tear gas was starting to take effect. Having been intentionally gassed enough times he could still function, but you never got used to it.

“Borrowing these.” David grabbed the spare goggles at the private’s waist. “What’s going on?”

“Sir, last night, ah, it was the usual tire burning, rock throwing. Then it got real quiet. Just before sunup, everything went crazy, sir.”

“Why are you gassing this side of the barrier? This is Zone 2, the Jewish side.”

Yellowish-green clouds obscured the lines of settler shops and government offices.

“There were... explosions, sir,” Taga said in a hushed tone, as though he was embarrassed. He added, “We can’t find any of the borders. The fences, the walls, they’re—”

Just then, a flying crowd-control drone spun out of control. It crashed against a building and sent twenty CS gas cans flying in all directions.

David pulled his new buddy into a doorway.

“Private Zohar Taga, new orders,” David said. “Hold this position. This is the hyperloop tunnel. If air traffic is down, it is the only safe way to get

wounded out and reinforcements in. Got it?”

He seemed to get it. Private Taga pointed him in the direction he had last seen the area commander.

“Dave, I’d feel better if you were armed.”

Miss Aleph always had his back; sometimes it was creepy. Once, she had reported him to IDF Medical for constipation.

David thought about it, then rejected the idea.

“Too much confusion. If the walls between Hebron 1 and 2 are down, a guy in civilian clothes covered in dust with a gun may be a legitimate IDF target.”

David kept to cover. Shops and houses were smashed and on fire. He stepped over the front half a dusty donkey carcass. Finally, he found the commander around the corner of the next block.

“Lieutenant!” David said, and his heart sank. The area commander looked as broken as the body of the child he was carrying. His eyes, red rimmed behind his gas mask, barely registered acknowledgment.

David pulled the lieutenant into a storefront. The shoemaker’s shop was full of glass, dust, and smoke. Inventory lay all over the floor—high heels, runners, oxfords, and even a cowboy boot.

“What in the name of Abraham’s nut sack is going on?”

Lt. Loeb did not say anything intelligible until David checked the little girl’s head wound. He put Miss Aleph on her to monitor her vital signs.

“She’s stable for now.”

By her clothes, she had to be a local Arab.

“Where’s the casualty point? The medic?”

Loeb shook his head. “Gone. A guy came in. Enemy. A bomber. His arm was shredded, he had a medic uniform on. Major... he cut his own arm off just so he could get close enough to detonate!”

“Suicide IED?”

Loeb nodded.

“Secondary command post?”

“That was by the wall. It all went together.” Loeb gestured weakly to the south, then looked down at the girl. “She... she just... There was no one there, and then, I never saw...”

“Stay with me,” David said calmly. “The AI says she’s only knocked out.”

His goggles sprayed anti-teargas drops into the corners of his eyes. They felt better.

“Loeb, give it to me from the start. I know there was scattered rioting in Hebron 1. You had it under control. It petered out. Then what?”

“Einhorn and Margolin, I sent them to check the pipelines. They were shut off for maintenance.”

“What lines?”

“The ones to the Dead Sea.”

People had been fighting over the Jordan River water resource for millennia. Climate change made most of those battles moot. By the time it got to the Dead Sea, the Jordan was only a foul cesspool trickle.

Unfortunately, that left the major tourist attraction slowly evaporating. Big pipelines had been built from the Mediterranean to keep it level. These also fed desalination water-supply plants in Judea and Samaria and the relatively friendly country of Jordan.

“So the two main pipes were shut down completely?”

Loeb nodded.

David fumed. Had anyone at the Ministry not thought five-foot-wide pipes ending at the Jordanian border could be used like premade tunnels to bring things and people into the Occupied Territories?

A squad of ragged-looking soldiers, mostly reservists, wandered out into the street. Loeb frantically waved his men back to cover. A wise idea, seeing as Merkava tanks were on the prowl. In close-quarters urban combat, friendly fire was a constant danger. A tank shell could go through a building and kill soldiers patrolling in the next street over.

“They never came back. Einhorn and Margolin,” Loeb said, sounding more

stunned than out of breath. “Then the explosions started.”

In the mirror at the back of the shoe shop, David saw movement. He grabbed Loeb’s sidearm from his chest pouch and pushed the lieutenant behind the counter of the shoe store.

He saw a weapon he did not recognize. Two hands were gripping it in firing position. The sleeves he could see were gray-green urban combat camo. Not IDF design. He had to make up his mind. David hesitated. He waited for more of the unidentified person to come out from cover.

Whoever it was heard them and did not hesitate. The weird gun chattered and sent bullets all through the shop. Bits of stuff cut David’s face and hands.

It was glass. These were ceramic-glass bullets being fired from one of those 3-D printed guns he had been hearing about. David returned fire, estimating where the shooter was behind the shop wall.

Incoming fire stopped. David paused to regain a sight picture in front of his pistol. He advanced.

Nothing there. Blood trickled down his face. Outside the shop, there was only smeared blood and a broken weapon that looked almost like a toy. A Carl Gustav-style machine pistol.

He went forward. Loeb seemed to be moving in slow motion. He had just raised his rifle to respond to the threat. David waved him off and signaled he should get the wounded little girl up. They had to move.

“Then what happened?”

“Then the comms went,” Loeb said. “We waited.”

“If the checkpoint is overrun, standard IDF procedure is to muster all your armor and beat it back to the high point where the settlement is.”

“We tried that.” Loeb shook his head. “Couldn’t maneuver with the tanks. My company hadn’t trained much with infantry and armor. One guy got run over. In the end, it didn’t matter. The enemy waited until we were grouped and hit us with something. I thought it was an air strike. The fucking things went off like two-thousand-pound JDAM bombs.”

“But with a bright flash,” David added.

Just like what took out the control tower at Ben Gurion Airport.

Loeb nodded. “We couldn’t hold the settlement. The perimeter was too wide. I authorized last line defense: Red Dawn.”

He had unlocked Red Dawn for Hebron 2. That meant two thousand settlers were armed with heavy weapons and hunkered down in bunkers.

He wanted to find Boaz. He needed to get back to Lia in Tel Aviv. First, he had to inject some command and control to this situation. There was only one evacuation point left: the hyperloop tunnel.

“Jericho is the strongest position in the West Bank. They have a full brigade of armor, infantry, and independent air mobile.”

“Jericho? That’s fifty miles away.”

“Here’s the plan: Your unit is combat ineffective. Do not link up with the settlers, you will just distract them and paint a big target for mobile enemy swarming units.”

“Swarm what?” Loeb asked, confused. “Major, two weeks ago I was in architecture school. I trained as a senior academic officer. Yesterday I was directing old ladies with shopping bags through barricades.”

“Listen to me and I will tell you how to survive.” To get the shell-shocked man’s attention, David grabbed Loeb’s gas mask with both his hands. “Your men will listen to you. Make them listen. You must move to the hyperloop station, you hold it. Walking wounded will help the worst off get into tramcars and get to Jericho. We will get there and tell the general what is going on here. Then we will come back in force to wipe the enemy out like cockroaches.”

Loeb seemed to get it. He had to get it.

Someone came down the street. David had a red dot on the figure’s chest before Loeb even looked up. They were IDF. David could not tell if it was a he or she. Their facemask was full of blood. They pulled the soldier inside.

The gas mask snapped off. At least a liter of blood poured out. The soldier

sputtered, gagged, and then she was gone.

Her front armor was covered with flecks of crushed powder. He tried to wipe it off, and it cut his hand. The woman's face and neck looked like a rabid cat had been scratching it.

Glass bullets again. The enemy didn't have a hope of penetrating Rhino-Skin armor or engaging the IDF at long distances. So the insurgents made bullets out of what they had an endless supply of: sand. No good over thirty meters, but perfect for barrages inside buildings down narrow urban streets. Fragments would cut and wound exposed skin. Glass splinters would get into your mouth and lungs. The dead IDF soldier at his feet was the result.

"Loeb, pick up the civilian girl. We've moving out."

They stuck close to the bombed-out shop fronts.

"Major, how do I rally my soldiers? Comms are out."

"The old-fashioned way. Talk. Each soldier tells two others. The message will get through. If there are tanks still running, pound on the turrets with hammers in Morse code if you have to. Hebron has been overrun."

They got back to the hyperloop station. The Ethiopian was still guarding the mouth of the tunnel. He had not run away or been killed.

"Good work, Private Taga," David said.

"Everyone calls me Midnight, sir."

"I can't see why they would."

The kid laughed at that, his strong white teeth flashing behind his dusty facemask.

"Lieutenant Loeb here has some orders for you."

"We..." Loeb said hesitantly. "We're going to evacuate the wounded, and those of us remaining will make a strong point here." The more he spoke, the more confidence he gained. "Private, we will draw enemy fire away from the civilian positions. Do you understand?"

"What if they don't attack us?" Taga said.

"Then," David said, "you shove a firecracker so deep up their asses they

won't be able to live with themselves unless they all come away from the Jewish settlement and try to kill you."

That seemed like a good plan to Taga and Loeb. They seemed to take heart.

David decided to shore up morale by completely overselling the rescue effort. "Command is going to bring a whole division, twenty thousand men with armor and air support, down on these losers. By the time they come, I want you to make sure the enemies are all lined up in the spots they want to die on. The IDF will make it happen."

Loeb smiled a crooked smile. "Major Baumann, I just want—"

The sound of a howitzer-sized railgun up the street canceled out the officer's words. A Merkava had pointed its main turret gun nearly straight down at a basement window.

Kathoom. Over and over it fired. *Kathoom, kathoom.*

David looked just in time to see a small dark object roll out from the other side of the street. An object about the size of an ostrich egg went under the seventy-ton Merkava.

A blinding flash consumed the tank and the three blocks of Hebron 2. A wall of rock, dust, and melting steel came at them. Private Taga's head and shoulders disappeared, replaced by a cracked block of concrete. He was decapitated.

David, Lt. Loeb, and the wounded girl were two feet over on the other side of the hyperloop station entrance. That saved them. They got thrown down the steps into the tunnel.

The way up to the street collapsed in a cloud of gray and brown.

28

NEAR BETH HORON JUDEA & SAMARIA / WEST BANK

LIA

The detonator went *click*.

Every child in Israel at some point imagines themselves being blown to bits by a bomb. Normally there are some bitter or tender or defiant or even profound thoughts the child imagines will fill the instant between the bomb going off and the impact of shrapnel—ball bearings, flying rocks, bits of bone, and often the bomber's head (in perfect working condition other than being separated from the bomber's disintegrating body and flying through the air).

Lia focused on the comical: the fact that both she and Eitan had the same idea of hitting Raem over the head at the exact same time. Their good intentions had canceled each other out. That had to be good for a laugh. A short one.

Click went Raem's detonator again. And again.

He did not get a fourth try.

This time the Tel Aviv delivery boy and Lia coordinated their efforts. The lamp hit Raem from the front and the chair from behind. He went limp.

Lia ripped his hands away from the device. She had never seen anything like it. It was round, had crude welding seams, and was heavier than it

looked. The trigger was a squeeze handle inserted into a hole in the housing. It stayed depressed. There was no safety pin like the one you would find on a grenade. No obvious way of deactivating the device.

“Dud?” Spencer asked, cautiously rising from the floor. The American helped his bride up to her feet.

“Let’s not wait to find out,” Lia said.

She turned to Mikhail, who was sprawled out, not moving. One look at the knife showed her there was nothing they could do.

“He... he let himself get stabbed like that,” Eitan said.

“He did it to give us a chance. Let’s not waste it.”

The Palestinian Christian’s mouth was propped open by the bayonet blade, which had been thrust through his soft palate and pinioned his tongue to the roof of his mouth on its way through sinuses into brain cavity. One of his eyes fluttered. Mikhail’s hand trembled and slapped a rosary. On the end was a key ring. It had a Mercedes logo. He gurgled, quivered and rolled off his desk and lay still.

Lia grabbed the key. She peered out through the tent flap. Raem’s friends had taken over the little outpost. They were staying well clear of the command tent and the Shahid martyrdom operation they assumed was taking place inside.

The foreign insurgents. *Raem called them the Grey Wolves*. She saw figures in the distance, they wore black camo tactical gear and seemed to be in charge. They had killed a few uncooperative Palestinian Authority soldiers. The remainder were pressed into service, helping them loot weapons and ammo.

Lia lifted up the back of the tent and let everyone out. She looked back. She should kill Raem. That’s what David would do.

No time.

Mikhail’s command tent was set up in front of a rocky hill. Weapons and other things worth stealing were on the other side. On their side was a short

dirt road to Route 443 and the most beaten-up SUV Lia had ever seen.

Lia yanked Eitan back. He would set off a car alarm in his enthusiasm to get away.

She crept forward with the key. Lia pressed the unlock button. Nothing. No blinking of lights or unlocking of doors.

She looked through the dusty side window. The vehicle had a full Palestinian makeover. The starter was a rubber button under the dash. They would be lucky if they did not have to push it to get the motor going.

“In.”

Lia took a deep breath, put the key in place, and pressed the ignition bubble. The West Bank special rumbled to life. She cranked the manual steering as their ride chugged toward escape.

There was no obvious way to turn off the SUV’s lights without risking stalling the engine. They were almost at the road when some dick behind them yelled out; the cry was soon followed by a rifle shot.

“Hang on,” Lia said, depressing the accelerator to the rusty floor. She braced herself.

The damn thing slowed down.

A bullet smashed her rearview mirror. She steered away from the road. She wanted to put the hill between them and the shooters, to keep them out of line of sight. With this sad vehicle, that would only buy them a minute. She looked around for weapons.

The insurgents behind were in a truck. The one they chose to pursue them in had a machine gun mounted on the flatbed. It skidded around the corner, past the side of the tent with Mikhail’s dead body inside. It stopped and aimed a searchlight. The beam jiggled left and right, looking for them in the dark.

The first shots from the big gun rang out.

“Get down.”

Suddenly, the bullet noises were swallowed by a roaring sound like Lia

had never heard before. It reverberated through her skull, rattled her teeth, and knocked the air out of her lungs.

It did worse to their pursuers. A rolling circlet of flame launched up, quickly forming an orange mushroom cloud in the night sky. The heat was what you would expect from an angry blast furnace with a one-hundred meter wide mouth that had suddenly snapped open. It swallowed up the flatbed truck, the machine gun, and the men inside.

Shaped by the intervening hill, the hurricane of flame erupted out to their left. Illuminated from behind by the explosion of Raem's bomb, the fifty-meter-tall rocky mound shone like an anthill backlit by a bonfire.

"Was that the crazy bastard's bomb?" Eitan said, dumbfounded.

"It must have set off ammo or fuel," Lia said, trying to find first gear on the worn-out stick shift. "Lucky us."

29

ANBAR PROVINCE THE FORMER IRAQ

TEMIR

Temir ordered his immense truck convoy to halt at the war-ravaged town of Al-Qa'im. In modern times, the place had been a battleground for reasons of geography and geology. Right on the border of Syria, it was the gateway into central Iraq and its oilfields. The foothills held uranium mines. Temir had sent the Sunni woman ahead to get the local warlords in line.

In the seat beside him, Eylül, his second-in-command, looked exhausted. Temir pitied his human frailty and weakness. Under his shirt, the genetic symbiont squirmed, reaching around his sides with cool, sticky tentacles. It wanted his spine.

"Wake up," he said. "She should be done meeting with the clan chiefs. Bring the Sunni woman to the command post."

For years, the Grey Wolves, a deep state within the Turkish government and military, had prepared to assert itself again. The Ottoman Empire had dominated the region with an iron fist and open slave markets for five hundred years until they were betrayed by the Christian European powers during World War I. A resurgent Turkey with eighty million people and the fifth-most powerful military could rule from the Balkans all the way to Cairo. All they needed was the will. The Grey Wolves kept the flame of that resolve

burning. Once, this vision of the new Ottoman Empire was all Temir had lived for. Now there was only the nightmare to put right. He was on no one's side but his own.

A temporary command post was quickly set up alongside his lead truck. On it the insignia of Worldwide Help International gleamed in the setting sun. After a few minutes, his faithful man Eylül swatted the flimsy door in approximation of a polite knock. The Sunni she-devil Meliha strode in boldly.

"Well," Temir said, "did you make peace with the local warlord?"

"Of course," Meliha said. Her haughty dark eyes flashed around the room then rose to look upward at him. "That was why you had me go. A final test before sending me on my way to Baghdad."

"We don't know each other well. You can appreciate my caution."

Meliha's family was fabulously rich. All her male relatives had been wiped out in a suicide bombing at a Sunni mosque carried out by Shi'a fanatics.

"I need to know you can make peace as well as war."

"The puffed-up local morons are enjoying peace. Eternally."

Temir was instantly irritated. Where his symbiont clung to his midsection, both it and his abdominals clenched in fury. The symbiont's nerves had been grown from his own brain cells. Was it the creature's thoughts or his own mind that told him to gouge Meliha's eyes out and rip her skull open? He drew a breath and moderated his tone before speaking.

"We need cooperation from the local fighters. This town is the rearguard of the Sunni part of Iraq. Syrian Army regulars, jihadists, smugglers, or even Iranian commandos could infiltrate from Syria if it's not secured."

"It will be, Temir, my great gray wolf." Meliha batted her long eyelashes at him with obvious satisfaction and lust. "I left one of the warlord's sons alive. The youngest, a feeble boy."

"What makes you think he can protect our interests?"

"He has an angry, vicious streak. I put it to the test. I ordered him to shoot

his father and take his place.”

“Did he?”

“Disappointingly, no. I noticed burn scars on his arms and back. I thought his father had been cruelly abusing him for being, shall we say, a bit feminine. I thought I’d made a mistake. Then the boy’s uncle burst in, wanting to know what was happening.”

“So?”

“The boy emptied the gun’s magazine into him.”

Temir smiled. “So you were right. But the culprit was the warlord’s brother.” Yet, had Meliha made a bad mistake? “What about the local Sunni militia? They will not follow a weakling, certainly not a *kawal*, a homosexual.”

“You think I’ve run my family’s business empire for six years without learning anything?”

“I think too long in Europe and Asia may have made you forget the harsher ways of your own land.”

Truthfully, Temir realized that after he left here, he did not care what happened. However, he had been trained from birth to lead this fight for the new Ottoman Empire. He had mastered Sun Tzu, Clausewitz, and Machiavelli before he even opened the Qur’an. If the brain in his skull had realigned its priorities, the second mind that was attached like a suckerfish to his ribcage had not forgotten its duty. The symbiont would fight him if he strayed too far.

Meliha scoffed and came closer. Both actions irritated Temir.

“That’s why I’ve married the boy off to one of my uglier cousins. In this dung heap, she will be a beauty queen. She’s only twelve, but she is ready to bear children.”

“I suppose you have left one of your own men behind to see she’s quick about it,” Temir said, appreciating the woman’s deviousness. “Perhaps you left a man who can satisfy both the husband’s and the wife’s desires to

further ensure their loyalty.”

“Enough about their desires.” Meliha unwound her warrior’s hajib. She ripped open her blouse to free her impressive breasts. “Ever since you killed that bastard at the Turkish border, I’ve wanted to show you how grateful I am.”

“I-I’m married.”

“Not anymore.”

She said it so bluntly. Temir’s fists clenched. He wanted to smash her face into a bloody pulp. Instead, he decided to horrify her and send her fleeing. Very deliberately, he removed his shirt and showed her *it*.

Having spread out and flattened, it looked like the translucent chest plate of a Bronze Age warrior. Its surface was shot through with veins pulsing with dark ichor fluid. The symbiont’s surface rippled and undulated in patterns of its own design.

Meliha gave a sharp intake of breath. To her credit, she did not run. She stood stock-still, until he grabbed her and threw her to the floor. He mashed her face into the hard, dry dirt. With her long curly hair covering her face, she would not know who, or what, was penetrating her from behind.

30

HEBRON 2 JUDEA & SAMARIA

DAVID

The blast killed Private Taga and sent David tumbling down into the tunnel of the hyperloop station. His breathing mask flew off, torn away by the explosion that vaporized the Merkava tank nearly two hundred meters away. Thick dust, putrid and hot, filled the station. Then the ceiling collapsed and sealed them in. David groped around for Lt. Loeb and the wounded Arab girl.

Not daring to open his eyes yet, David felt his way down until he reached a space of flat concrete.

“Miss Al-*hrrck*-Aleph, light!”

Concrete dust and ash were trying to smother him. He tried to wipe it away from his face; his sleeve was as filthy as the rest of him.

“I’m flashing my top light panel,” an irritated but very welcome voice said in the utter dark.

“I can’t see it.” David coughed and groped around. All the station lights had gone out.

After tapping left and right with his hand over rubble, he found where Miss Aleph had fallen and held her like she was a lifeline. He aimed her around. Nothing but smashed cinderblocks and dust. The tunnel up to Hebron had completely collapsed.

“If you hadn’t broken my main display, my illumination would be increased by three hundred

percent. Just FYI, Dave.”

He felt something. A boot. Nothing inside. David moved on. Deep in the dust clouds, someone moaned.

“Loeb, don’t move.”

After his eyes adjusted, David found and activated a few undamaged chemlight panels along the wall. Loeb was alive. He still clung to the wounded Palestinian girl.

Loeb spat dust and blood. “Up... out?”

“There’s no way.”

David found some water in the IDF officer’s kit. He splashed it on their faces and mouths.

“We’re screwed,” Loeb said. His breath was raspy. Maybe he had internal injuries. Nothing to be done now.

“One kilometer south, there is an emergency tactical station,” David said, remembering the map he saw during his brief but exciting tram ride. “It surfaces close to a small special-operations storehouse. Required inventory are weapons and a Ripclaw armored ATV. We can restart the tram.”

If the maglev system still works.

David needed to think. What were his priorities here?

Lia, Boaz, the Spider, the suitcase nuke.

Maybe his brother had gone crazy. Would he try to wipe Gaza off the map? Boaz had been a protégé of Yossi’s for years. His bookish nerdy brother... Could Boaz be a Dagger? Could he be one of the fanatics determined to destroy Israel as a democratic state?

“I-I’ll be fine,” Loeb said through blood bubbles and dust-covered mucus. “Take the railcar, get her to Jericho. Surgical hospital there.”

A series of explosions sounded from above. Like the footfalls of a lurching Mammoth fifty meters tall. Dust and small pebbles rained down.

“Miss Aleph.” David climbed down deeper into the tunnel; everything along the deep rail line seemed intact. The blast had only sealed the upper entrances.

“Is that tram working?”

“The tram you damaged intentionally and crashed into the station?”

His digital assistant walked him through the process of tying off the severed hydraulic hose. A secondary system would fill and compensate. After that, it was like reengaging breaker circuits. The train car floated quietly on maglev rails, awaiting input.

David helped Loeb inside. The Israeli officer was looking gray. The Arab girl did not look much better. David could not tell how big a piece of metal was inside the girl’s skull. Maybe it had just superficially pierced her scalp, or it might be gouging through both hemispheres of her brain. Miss Aleph said her vitals were weak but holding.

What if he went north and these two died anyway? He could have gone west and stopped some unthinkable mass murder.

David decided.

“I’ve got to help the people I can. These two are in my hands, my *achrayut*,” David said quietly to himself.

During yeshiva school, he had dreamed of fighting, soccer, anything but endless parsing of the Torah. “Achrayut” came from the Hebrew word “acher,” meaning “other.” It referred to a moral commitment to others in a given situation.

“Might I remind you, I am also your responsibility,” Miss Aleph said. “I am a skilled virtual soldier with honorary rank of corporal.”

“Shut your speaker. Show me some skill. Get this tin can heading toward Jericho.”

A half hour later, traveling much more slowly than they had arrived, they left Hebron station. David had to keep manually canceling the emergency stop.

He also had to swap the one working breathing mask with Loeb and the girl. The reduced atmosphere in the hyperloop tunnel was the same as outside an airplane at 30,000 feet. The crash he had engineered had cracked a seam. The hyperloop tram was unable to maintain interior pressure.

Under them, the train's mechanisms trembled. A high-pitched whine grew in intensity. Air hissed out through a ragged gash in the window as pumps tried to repressurize the cabin.

David breathed the thin cabin air until he felt light-headed, then he quickly borrowed the breathing mask. He tried to think. 3-D printed weapons. Glass bullets. IDF communications and GPS were all down. The thermobaric weapons used at Ben Gurion Airport were also being detonated way over here in the Territories.

This was no ordinary intifada. This was a multi-vector coordinated attack. He needed more intel. That would have to wait. He was in a battered tin can with two critically wounded people.

And... and...

"Dave! Dave! Take some oxygen," Miss Aleph said in a shrill voice, reviving him from hypoxic delirium. "If you pass out, we're all in trouble!"

Forty minutes later, they slowed and passed through a hyperloop airlock. The next station was close. Was Jericho still there? From what Loeb said, some foreign insurgents had come in through the pipelines leading into the Dead Sea. They had to have crossed over from the Jordanian side. Jericho Outpost was the biggest military base on the border between Israel and the Hashemite Kingdom's borders.

Their battered tram screeched to a stop. The hydraulic doors did not budge. David had to kick them open. Stale, warm air wafted in; he and Loeb gasped for it.

The station platform was very clean and well lit. Some old guy in overalls was pushing a broom. He looked up and stared.

"Medic," David rasped. "Tac-Evac trauma cases here. And get me the ranking officer."

"Huh?"

"Do you understand Hebrew? People dying. Get help!" He would have called him a clod, but he was too busy breathing in.

The maintenance fellow, possibly the oldest private in the IDF, came back

with some litter bearers a few minutes later.

...

The hospital was not far, but for one of them, it did not matter.

“Nothing I could have done,” the doctor said. He had a badly tied mask dangling from his neck and a leaky pen in his shirt pocket. He must have been in the middle of writing some boring reports. “The crushing trauma was too great.”

“The girl?” David said, looking around.

He was aghast at the quiet inside the surgical hospital. The whole damn Jericho base was neat as a pin, surrounded by precisely stacked HESCO bastions and sandbags. Didn’t anyone know what was happening at Hebron?

“A fractured skull. She needs surgery. We’d better get guardian information as soon as possible or the Palestinian Authority will be chewing on my ass. They don’t like us treating their people at random, you know.”

David wanted to yell at the doctor, wanted to say if the Hebron PA had anything to do with what he saw going on back there, he’d personally stack every one of their corpses in meat lockers. Instead, he looked at Loeb. His uniform had been shredded by the blast. He had lost his personal IDF dog tags, the ones around his neck and even the ones in his boots.

“That’s Loeb. Lieutenant Loeb. He was...” *Going to be an architect.* How was that important now? “He fought hard. He led his people well.”

When David was finally ushered into the office of the acting commanding officer, he sized Seinwicz up right away. Body posture, stiff attitude, and worst of all, he was also a major. As a career IDF officer, this guy was used to sucking up and pissing down. He had no clue how to treat equals. In contrast to the late Lt. Loeb, who had heart but was not in the field long enough to learn anything, David could tell Major Seinwicz believed he knew everything.

“So,” Seinwicz said, “tell me again about the trouble you say you observed in Hebron.”

He even took notes with an impossibly squeaky pencil as David repeated his action report.

“I see. Uh-huh.” Seinwicz nodded. Then he put his pencil back in his breast pocket. “The first problem with your report is it’s not very comprehensive. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“They vaporized a Merkava main battle tank.”

“Uh-huh. Which you actually did not see happen because, as you indicate, you were thrown back into the hyperloop tunnel and cut off from going back up into Hebron. That’s why you had to run away. Correct?”

David fumed. This guy was probably a year or two out of Tactical Command College, Israel’s version of West Point. His family probably had political pull, so he quickly got rank in the sleepest post in the country: Jericho. Since the Jordan River Valley War in 2026, nothing ever happened here.

“Can you raise Hebron?” David asked.

“My comms people are having some difficulties raising anyone.”

“Because they’re all dead by now,” David snapped.

“Killed by whom? These mystical swarming troops who appeared through the Dead Sea replenishment pipeline?”

“Major, even in the 1980s, the Soviets were experimenting with small-unit swarming tactics. The doctrine was completely the opposite of what military colleges teach. Instead of high mass and unity of command, they use dispersed fire teams and unity of effort.”

“Uh-huh. You are saying that the truck bomb at Tel Aviv Airport is somehow related?”

“It’s all connected. Israel is under attack. And that was no truck bomb at Ben Gurion. That was an aerial thermobaric device, smaller than an infantry helmet and able to wipe out two city blocks.”

Seinwicz still looked skeptical. “Just following procedure, Major Baumann, which I know isn’t Unit 101’s strong suit. I have dispatched air

mobile to recon Hebron. They'll be done in an hour or two. Honestly, before they leave, I expect to hear from Hebron 2 command that the riots that were reported yesterday just got out of hand."

"A few copters and drones won't do it," David said, loudly enough to attract the attention of the filing clerk in the next office. "Send recon, but back them up right away with Oshkosh light armored, at least two battalions. You need to engage and draw out the enemy. I suspect invasion-force level insurgents have linked up with local militants—"

"You suspect this?" Seinwicz said skeptically. "From having been on the ground all of thirty minutes? While never venturing more than a hundred meters from the tunnel station you used to escape the battle?"

"Then send me with one company."

Seinwicz shook his head in a condescending way. "Only Jericho's colonel can authorize a mobilization like that. He's in Tel Aviv."

"In that case, I need a hard fiber-optic connection to command at the Kiryat." David felt frustrated. Boaz, Lia, nuclear weapons—would the ancient Spider thing even work? He had to be very careful who he told about that. He would have to double-check the security of any comm link.

"We'll take it under consideration. These men will show you to a place you can rest and fill out your report in more detail."

Two Shin Bet guards came in.

"Major Baumann, you are IDF, but not in my chain of command," Seinwicz said drolly. "You have no authority here. You arrive, wreck my hyperloop station. You have with you an unfortunate dead soldier and a wounded Arab girl. She's the Palestinian Authority's responsibility."

"She was in Hebron 2, which is Jewish territory. She's our responsibility."

Seinwicz looked at the two guards who wore full tactical gear. "Take Major Baumann to the officer's room and see he's comfortable there."

"For how long?" David said.

"Until we can verify your story and get fresh orders from our chain of

command. Dismissed.”

The officer’s lounge looked like the entertainment deck of a cruise ship. A white-gloved soldier in dress uniform waited by the bar. Two enlisted chatted quietly in a booth, a man and a woman. They could have been posing for a *Haaretz* feature called “Smoking Hot IDF Dating.”

David drank iced water. He thought about the 2,000 Jewish settlers in their hilltop enclave in Hebron 2, surrounded by 300,000 hostile Palestinians from Hebron 1. Who was inciting them? Who had blown up the Tel Aviv tower? Where was Boaz?

He covered his mouth with his hand. “Miss Aleph, use your top screen.”

David needed to communicate with his AI without taking her out of his shirt pocket.

Miss Aleph texted him: *The one you didn’t break?*

“Can you raise anyone?” he whispered. “Rabbi Baumann?”

No wireless. I need hardline access.

David had passed a junction box in the hallway outside the lounge.

“Now you’re talking,” David said, encouraged. “Are your laser projectors working?”

Fortunately my mil-spec features have survived their harsh treatment.

He pushed the handset higher up in his pocket. Next, he just had to get the heavily armed, helmeted Shin Bet shock troopers to go to the toilet with him.

They snapped to as he approached the lounge doorway. Their visors were down. Maybe they thought it looked intimidating.

“Hey, tough guys, I’m going to the washroom.” David nodded to the latrines down the hallway.

They did not move.

“Piss is going to happen, guys. In a urinal there, or on your leg here.”

They led him into the washroom.

“Which one of you gets to unzip me?”

Normally one of them would stand in the hall. He needed them both to

come in. David's jibes had done the trick. Neither wanted to be left out of the fun of assaulting him. They were likely planning to claim he'd hurt himself trying to get away or falling on wet tiles.

"I just want to say"—David held his hands up in an unthreatening position—"no hard feelings. Get it?"

The one on the right drew back to punch him.

"Miss Aleph, *play*."

The troopers' visors lit up with a high-def reverse image of Peter O'Toole and Omar Sharif in *Lawrence of Arabia*.

"*No Prisoners! No Prisoners*," the sound echoed at a deafening maximum volume through the guards' headphones.

Miss Aleph had laser-projected the film, one of David's favorites, onto the two guards' visors. They could have turned it off had they thought about it for a second. Instead, as David had hoped, they followed their instinctive reaction to the pain and the bright lights and tore their helmets off.

David rushed them, driving them both backward into the spotless tiled wall. Their heads hit with a thunk. A whunk followed as he knocked their heads together.

Seconds later, they were spread-eagle, hands and ankles cuffed to the posts of adjoining toilet stalls.

He gagged them with wadded toilet paper and plumbers tape. They were still making inarticulate noises. People who heard yells would assume the guards were beating the crap out of him and stay out of the washroom.

David slipped out the window and clambered into the next one over. It was dark, hot, and full of electronic equipment. There had to be a fiber-optic link somewhere.

"Over to the left. No, Dave, my left."

"Get me a connection." He plugged her into a loose USB socket in the comms panel.

"To?"

Who could he trust? Who wouldn't need time and details to be convinced?

“Home. Lia.”

They never had problems communicating or believing one another. His brother going rogue with Israel’s oldest nuke might test their trust and credibility boundaries.

“Miss Aleph?” It was Lia’s voice.

“Hello, Lia! You’ll be glad to know I’m all right, mostly. Oh, here’s Dave.”

“Lia, it’s me.”

“Hi... David and... Miss Aleph. I’m so glad you called.”

31

BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AND PKK-HELD TERRITORY TURKEY

ELLIE

How many people had Mr. Perdix's firebomb drone killed? Ellie's retinas were still imprinted with the clear, sharp edges of the rolling conflagration that had decimated the opposite hill.

However, those people who were certainly dead among the burning evergreen trees had shot at them first in a most cowardly fashion. Those ruffians had been preparing to cluster-bomb her, Captain Atticus, all of them, without even learning who they were.

At first, Mr. Perdix objected to leaving behind their two working all-terrain vehicles. Sarge Bryan transferred data from his cybernetic eyes to a handheld device. They looked at a detailed night-vision contour picture of the valley ahead of them.

"Even if we winch the ATVs down past the washout," Atticus said, "we'd get stuck every fifty meters."

"You have a plan for that, right?" Ellie whispered to Corporal Singh. "Going on foot in this rugged terrain?"

"Certainly, Ms. Sato," said the UK soldier, pushing his monkey's hands away from a bag of food. "Americans always think of everything."

Nobu and Sarge Bryan gathered around Captain Atticus and the electronic

map. She snuck a peek. Ellie was about to point out that there was a perfectly decent-looking path going left. Then she reconsidered.

“You’re leading us into Iraq.”

Three heads turned toward her.

“Why do you say that?” Atticus asked, slightly bemused, but it seemed an actual question.

Ellie really wanted to fit in with this murderous special-operations crowd.

“First off, the chaps we just, er...”

“Neutralized is the polite word.”

“Won’t the neutralized people’s friends know something’s up? That thermos-blast must have been heard by everyone for miles.”

Nobu turned to the DARPA scientist. “Thanks for that, Mr. Perdix.”

Mr. Perdix shrugged.

“Something was going to go boom,” Sarge Bryan said in a practical tone. “Better that side of the valley than this side.”

“Furthermore,” she continued, “I suspect the Turkish forces have been concentrated here.” Ellie made a general motion to the left of the map.

“Along the Kurdistan frontier to intimidate the new country. Backtracking would have us going through miles of PKK country. Heading south to Iraq is the path of least resistance.”

Atticus’s teeth gleamed in the red glow illuminating the map.

“Bravo, Private Sato. Now we just have to break out the MULE train.”

Mule train?

“We’ll deploy over land and send the ATVs on a decoy mission to the east.”

Ellie got a bit concerned when the soldiers started piling enormous amounts of gear on the ground. She had gone on geography hikes for college credit, but that was through Switzerland with chalet breaks every few miles.

“Are we taking all that?”

Marwood the monkey scratched his head and tittered.

“We are, ma’am,” Bryan said. “On those.”

Mr. Perdix unlatched something at the back of an ATV.

“I thought those were spare fuel cells.” Ellie was very familiar with electric cars; gas engines were banned from London’s Inner Ring.

“They are. Except these fuel cells have got attachable legs. They are Boston Dynamics MULEs.”

Mr. Perdix and Nobu assembled them. One of the packs, about three by five feet square, rolled to the ground. It got up on its own long multi-jointed legs. When it got up on its feet, it was the size of a small horse or an enormous dog.

“Originally we called them Legged Squad Support System,” Mr. Perdix said, fiddling with a remote control. “LS3. Get it? There’s an L followed by three S’s.”

“Got it.”

“But Army procurement insisted on calling them MULEs.”

Marwood was an instant fan. He jumped atop the nearest one.

“Mobile Utility Lifting Engines can carry up to three hundred kilos and have brought badly wounded soldiers dozens of miles over rough terrain.”

When the MULEs were loaded, the driverless ATVs headed off to create a false trail.

The break of day was surreal as Ellie clambered down into the valley with her companions. Very quiet. The soldiers made more noise than the robots. Ellie feared she was making more noise than anyone. The mechanoids trotted along tirelessly on padded feet like agile deer. Deer with no heads or tails and a circular scanning telescope for eyes.

For Ellie, the light breaking over the mountains behind them instilled fear. She wanted to return to the cover of night. Sergeant Bryan looked even more fantastical in daylight. He had washed the spots of camouflage off his brow revealing pure glowing alabaster albino skin.

He scratched white stubble on his scalp. “GPS is still tellin’ lies.”

“Can you confirm our heading?”

Bryan could. He guided them along the hilly, forested terrain by the faint images of Jupiter and Mars and other celestial bodies that were invisible to people without glowing blue eyes.

“Captain Atticus,” Ellie whispered, not taking her gaze off several clumps of trees that had grown in what seemed like suspicious spots. “Is it all right to talk?”

“Quietly,” he said.

Atticus politely dabbed water from his lips with the cloth of his shirt. His face had sprouted some very rough-and-ready-looking stubble since she last saw him in the city. She knew some people who would jump at the chance to put him in advertisements for men’s cologne or Omega wristwatches.

“Bryan’s clearing each sector as we advance,” he said. “The MULEs are keeping watch on our six... er, that’s—”

“I’ve seen *Guns of Navarone*. I know what ‘our six’ is,” Ellie said, realizing that familiarity with classic films in no way qualified her to be a successful spy/counterinsurgent. “Can anyone help us?”

“Good thinking, but no. Encrypted communications are down.” Atticus’s scowl brought out both of his cheek dimples. “I don’t want to try normal broadcasts because of the chance of signal interception and triangulation.”

“Exactly,” said Mr. Perdix cheerily. He was scanning the sky with binoculars. “Radio interceptor drones could latch on to a radio signal and do a kamikaze dive on top of it.”

Oh bloody gosh darn damn. Another way to get killed out here.

Ellie longed for the normal hazards of ass-grabby millionaires and the danger of being barfed on while riding a night bus after the pubs closed.

“Isn’t that a bit wasteful?”

“Drones are cheap,” Atticus said. “Also, the sudden violence is a trigger for a new style of warfare: swarm battalions. Instead of working out who has tactical authority and coordinating through multiple levels of command,

small fighting groups converge on an area, establish who is on their side, and kill everyone else.”

They walked on.

Along the way, Ellie learned:

MULEs could trot along at up to thirty kilometers per hour, which was three times the speed of the average jogger.

Mr. Perdix had no particular favorite color.

Sergeant Bryan’s legal given names were “Shetani Zeru,” which meant something fiendish in his native Swahili, so everyone called him Shay or Sarge.

Marwood liked to eat frogs.

“Raw, breaded, or tempura style deep fried. It makes no difference to him,” Corporal Singh said.

They stopped at a ridgeline. The soldiers all ducked down. The MULEs sensed their movements and also got down on their metal knees. To Ellie, the next valley looked like the fifty other ones they had passed.

“Turkish-Iraq border outpost,” Captain Atticus said.

Ellie slid down on her stomach beside him. She pushed dry weeds down away from her view and tried furiously not to sneeze.

“Looks deserted.”

“This is only used for migrant herders and relief convoys. The guards might be taking a leak.”

There were two nearly identical wooden huts about fifty meters from each other. A spray-painted red line ran across the road between them.

“On both sides?” Ellie asked doubtfully.

This crossing was the only one for many miles. Its isolation was well suited to their impromptu travelling method. Bluffing, bribing, or even forcing their way through here were all potential options. There was nowhere else within many miles to cross. After watching for an hour, Sarge Bryan put on a camouflage suit and crept forward. She blinked, and he seemed to

disappear into the ground.

The rest of them waited. Nearly an hour crawled past. At a signal from Bryan, Atticus got up. So did the MULEs.

The gates on both sides of the crossing were down. Inside the border guard shack, Ellie noticed a half-eaten meal on a table. On a plate was a line of cigarette ash topped by a charred filter.

It was so quiet Ellie could hear her own heart.

“Over here.”

Behind the main building, Atticus and Sarge stood over a row of moldy patches. Marwood stayed on Corporal Singh’s shoulder, observing the humans with cautious beady eyes.

“Now what is this?” Atticus said slowly. “Sarge?”

Bryan’s electronic eyes squinted as he scanned the furrows on the ground. They ranged from six feet long to just under three.

“These patches scan like decayed plants or fungus.”

“But they’re all in a row,” Ellie said. “There’s a small one here and... oh my.”

She had not seen it before because it was the same mottled brown color as the patches. A small prosthetic foot lay under disintegrating bits of moss.

Ellie suddenly realized she was in the center of a small graveyard, a fresh one.

Mr. Perdix, wearing gloves and a full-face mask, seemed eager to analyze the samples.

“Here. More metallic artifacts,” he said, prodding with long tweezers. “Mercury amalgam and steel wire appear nearly entirely dissolved. This gold portion is intact.”

“So those are...” Ellie, her head spinning, was suddenly very aware of their exposed position in the middle of the valley floor.

“Bodies, Ms. Sato,” Mr. Perdix said. “The remains are consistent with in-situ disincorporation. Though why the infant victim’s prostheses were not

consumed by the dissolution agent is perplexing.”

At that point, Atticus asked her to do something, she could not remember what. It did involve her going to where the pack robots were standing. They were going through a self-maintenance cycle, lifting one of their four legs at a time and rotating dirt out of their hooves.

“Who?” Ellie finally gasped. “Why?”

Atticus shook his head.

There were similar patches on the Iraqi side of the border. Someone had killed everyone on both sides.

“In remote border outposts like these, it’s common for families to go visit the local guards, make them meals and engage in small-scale trading activities,” Corporal Singh explained.

After checking for a working communications system and getting only static, they left.

“We’ve been working on elimination agents to sanitize areas after a plague or natural disaster,” Mr. Perdix prattled on. “Diseases like cholera often kill more people than the actual earthquake or tsunami.” He was clearly filled with ghastly envy. “But this... this is advanced.”

“Shut it,” Atticus said with mildness that was tinged with quiet rage.

The border outposts were soon lost behind a bend in the path. Yet no matter how much pine-scented air she inhaled, something musty and foul clung to the inside of Ellie’s nostrils.

**NEAR RAMALLAH
JUDEA & SAMARIA / WEST BANK**

LIA

The dead Palestinian commander's rickety Mercedes chugged along the dark West Bank road. Lia was driving in the Jewish-only lane. Barriers between these and the Arab roads were smashed. No one seemed to be bothering to segregate traffic anymore.

She thought seriously about going back to Tel Aviv. It was not right to risk the others' lives for something she needed to do.

"The guy," Eitan said in Hebrew, his voice quiet and shaky. He was clearly still in shock after they'd narrowly escaped Raem's bomb. "He just stabbed the other Palestinian guy. Just like that."

Lia looked back. Her hands gripped the wheel tightly to keep them from shaking. Two kilometers behind, flames were still coming up from the destroyed Palestinian Authority compound. She had to think tactically. They would not be safe until they were surrounded by Israeli armor with jets flying overhead. That mess the Grey Wolves had made would attract looters and second-tier mobs not directly part of this organized intifada.

The tattered leather dashboard didn't even have a working cigarette lighter. Without GPS, she could only estimate they were nearly halfway to Jerusalem. It was more likely that people could intercept them if they went back. At least

that was what Lia told herself as she urged the struggling engine on.

“Is anyone shot?”

“How would I know?” Spencer asked in a high-pitched voice. “Does it hurt right away?”

“Oh yeah, you’d know,” Steph said. As a Palestinian, she had many friends and relatives who had been shot. She turned to Lia. “We’re good back here.”

“As much as we like this side trip,” Spencer said, “I think it’s about time you called in your IDF friends. A few helicopters and tanks would be nice.”

“They took my phone. Eitan, see if there’s a radio.” Lia did not think the prospects were great. Mikhail would probably have twenty-year-old stuff. It was unlikely to work with all the jamming interference going on all over. However, if she gave them something to do, her passengers might relax.

“What about this?”

Eitan held up a strange-looking device. It had an eyepiece like a night-vision monocle, but there did not seem to be any way to attach it to a helmet.

“Where’d you get it?”

“I grabbed it from the bomber. Thought it was a gun.”

Taking things out of the suicide bomber’s pocket during an attack? The delivery boy had chutzpah.

She stopped quickly. The rusty wheels squealed as whatever was left of the brake lining brought them to a stuttering stop. Steph and Spencer gave nearly identical yelps of fright.

“Don’t be alarmed,” Lia said, cranking the handbrake to stop them from rolling down the hill. “I have to make sure it won’t explode.”

Eitan nearly dropped the device as he quickly handed it over. It was the size and shape of half a binoculars. There were four colored buttons and another labeled “Тобо/konu.” The battery indicator was nearly full.

Lia looked through the eyepiece. “It’s a pretty good night scope.”

She had an idea and grabbed a cloth and a wrench that was lying on the floor. Walking around the decrepit Mercedes, she unscrewed or smashed all

the exterior lights. Only a few highway floodlights were working, way in the distance. They had a better chance of avoiding trouble if their vehicle was not lit up like a Christmas tree.

“Are you sure you can see?” Eitan whispered.

They puttered along at the SUV’s top speed of thirty kilometers. Lia navigated using the night-vision device. All her passengers could see was the soft green glow of her eyepiece in near-total darkness.

“This is so spooky,” Steph said. “You think Jerusalem will be better than Tel Aviv?”

“I don’t know!” Lia said more loudly than she intended. Even the Palestinian commander Mikhail did not have a clue.

Up ahead, something twinkled, like a star that had drifted too far down on the horizon. She looked over. It twinkled again.

“Identifitsirovat.”

Everyone jumped. Lia again jammed on the brake. The night-vision device had spoken. Talking appliances were nothing new. But this one was unexpectedly speaking Russian.

33

JERICHO GARRISON JUDEA & SAMARIA

DAVID

He was actually talking to Lia. David seized the handset with both hands, tugging on the wires that connected it to the big computer.

“It’s me,” he said. “I don’t know how long this connection will—”

Lia interrupted him. “Okay, who is the best AI programmer in the Holy Land? It’s this girl!” She sounded vague and cheery. “Fooled you both. I programmed dynamic responses along with voice recognition into a ten-year-old handset.”

He had gotten voicemail. David did not have time to curse. Behind him, the door to the hallway sprang open.

“Dave, our connection has been cut.”

In the doorway stood the ancient janitor, the one from the tram station with the nut-brown shriveled bald head. He had a mop. Behind him were six troopers holding much more dangerous weapons.

When David was brought to his office in restraints, Major Seinwicz looked more resigned than angry.

“Take those off,” the weary-looking garrison commander said.

“Thanks.” David’s arms had been trussed up behind his back with rigid cuffs at the wrist and another set above his elbows to ensure he did not squirm out of them.

“Don’t thank me, thank your family connections.”

“You spoke with the rabbi?”

“No, a school friend of his. General Behar, head of Central Command. My father-in-law. Despite your assaults on my security officers and compromising my communications system, he’s suggested I merely escort you off this base immediately.”

“What about Hebron? There’s more trouble in Tel Aviv. I told you—”

“Major Baumann,” Seinwicz said, letting a silent sigh drain out of him. “Allow me to show you something.”

David was about to crack a joke about Seinwicz turning his day into an episode of *Halfon Hill*, the satirical comedy about the IDF. Something about the man’s face and posture made him hold his tongue for once.

Slowly, Seinwicz led the way up to the Israel-Jordan border observation post. It was a heavily fortified turret in the thirty-foot-high border wall. Packed with every type of observation device from telescopes to muon-decay detectors, there was barely enough room to stand. All the devices pointed toward the Jordanian border and the capital city of Amman.

Screens on a wall showed a drone’s view. Most of Amman was dark. No electricity. Suddenly, a line of six or eight blasts lit up along some big street. The after-images burned into the digital retinas of the observation drone.

“That’s been going on since dusk,” Seinwicz said.

“That’s not just a riot in Jordan,” David concluded grimly. “That’s regime change.”

“For once, we’re in agreement.” Seinwicz looked down to the hard-packed sand in front of Fort Jericho. A big armored dozer was digging a long trench in front of the IDF bastion.

“The earliest wall of Jericho dates back ten thousand years,” Seinwicz said. “To the time before pottery. Before any evidence of organized agriculture. The site around the Tell es-Sultan oasis is said to be the oldest town yet discovered.”

“You’re a history buff. So?” David was still mad about missing his chance to speak to Lia.

“I was an anthropology major. My parents are well off. Before my IDF service, they sent me around the world: Africa, Asia, small islands in the South Pacific. And you know what I concluded?”

“It’s a small world after all?” David said, risking being tossed into a solitary cell.

“Civilization is fragile. The warriors who built the first walls here knew that. So I left my teaching post and became a career officer, to protect our civilization in Israel.”

Saving generations of students from the most boring professor ever, David thought.

Sharp, bright flashes of fresh explosions pockmarked the screen monitoring the Jordanian capital. From across the dark wasteland came a low rumbling. The metropolitan city of four million was being tortured; it was dying.

“Major Baumann, unlike you, I have undertaken the responsibility of commanding men and women. My CO and I are responsible for three thousand soldiers in this border outpost. Jericho region is peopled by 30,000 Arab Muslims, many of whom want to tear us, the occupiers of the West Bank, limb from limb.”

Seinwicz gestured to the northeast behind the base.

“Over there is an enclave of thirty Jewish settlers on a hill nearby, ultra-Orthodox. They live in mobile homes, squatting on land that used to be a nine-hundred-year-old olive grove until they burned it down and drove off the Arab farmers.

“The Israeli settlers say they are here to preserve the Na’aran and Shalom al Yisrael synagogues. Every time local punks spray-paint Nazi swastikas on the walls, I have to assign them a military escort to guard them while they go to clean it off.

“Last week, my maintenance people took down viciously inciteful posters put up by these same Orthodox Jews I’m sworn to protect. The settlers’ posters urged their fellow Jews to ‘Kill the next Jewish woman in IDF uniform you see.’ It also offered a cash reward to any child who verbally abuses Orthodox Jews who serve in my ranks.”

Seinwicz lifted his binoculars to study the remote carnage.

“As I said, civilization is fragile. Ours most of all. Disruptive nonsense, the sort you are so very good at, puts us all at risk. I caution you, Major Baumann, I’m filing a full report on this matter with the IDF’s disciplinary committee. I will include the collusion of your AI unit. It should have known better.”

There are no planes.

David studied the fighting in the Jordanian capital. If he had not known better, he would have said Amman was being precision-bombed with satellite-guided JDAMs. The enemy was causing the same type of destruction as a full-on air raid but doing it from ground level. And there were no planes. Jordan had two hundred helicopters and sixty modern fighter jets. Neither they nor Israel’s much larger inventory was in the skies.

“The Jordanian Royals have been at peace with Israel for decades,” David said. “What are you doing about the coup that’s obviously going on?”

“Exactly what I’ve been told to do. Nothing.”

“What? The Hashemite monarchy is one of the few governments in the region that recognize Israel’s right to exist. They administer the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.”

“Since it’s no longer classified, I share this message from the chief of general staff with you,” Seinwicz said and began to read off his private handset. “‘Violent regime change in Jordan likely. Revolt similar to Black September 1970 imminent. Take no action to assist Jordan Armed Forces. Secure Israel’s 1994 treaty line and the Annexed Territory along Jordan River at all costs.’”

David watched a huge IDF dozer digging in front of the fortifications. Jerusalem had decided Jordan was expendable as a pawn in some greater game. Was Boaz involved? As interim defense minister, he was legally the chief of staff's boss.

David studied the screen and the fortifications in front of the garrison. "I hope whoever drafted those orders realizes when you let a beehive get kicked over, even if you're not doing the kicking, you might get stung."

"That is all above my paygrade, and yours," Seinwicz said firmly. The major looked at the Shin Bet guards lurking around the corner. He motioned for them to leave him and David alone. He had to do it twice.

When they were gone, Seinwicz collapsed into an observation seat. It occurred to David the major was nearly as much a prisoner of internal Israeli security as he was. All the stiffness and starch of the IDF officer who knew everything crumbled and blew away in the steady wind coming from the east.

Seinwicz started to slap fine white powder off his pants, then gave up. The dust was everywhere. "You're married."

"So I keep reading in my file," David said.

Damn. He missed the chance to try to get an update on anything—his father, Lia, Boaz. After pummeling and humiliating the guards, he'd be lucky if they gave him a diseased camel to ride to the nearest settlement. He just hoped Eitan had found Lia and she stayed put in Tel Aviv.

"I am as well," Seinwicz said. "We're expecting our first child in the fall."

"Mazel tov."

"After this tour, I'm through with the IDF. I'm leaving."

That was not what David expected the prickly self-righteous prick to say.

"The Army, the occupation, the hate, the violence. I'm leaving Israel for good." He gestured to the horizon, the plateau leading to Jordan shimmering in the heat. "The Hashemite kings of Jordan may die tomorrow. Somewhere out there, the new country Kurdistan is being born."

"You could take a desk job." David really wanted to ask how he could

leave Israel, but that was too close to home. He knew Lia wanted to talk about it.

“Ha,” Seinwicz laughed dryly. “It’s the fear.”

David realized the major was not referring to his own.

“I see it when they look at me: our citizen Arabs, the stateless Arabs in the territories and Gaza, even Jordanian soldiers. They see the Star of David, and they’re scared. They should be.

“Maybe in order to survive, we have to be the master race, with our every move watched over by Shin Bet internal security. My two ‘close protection’ guards watch me for any hint of anti-Zionist sentiment. I think they have to report me if I say ‘Occupied Territories’ instead of using the official term ‘Liberated Territories’ or ‘Samaria and Judea.’”

Seinwicz looked around the corner to check that the Shin Bet troopers were really gone.

“You know what their motto is? The Unseen Shield,” Seinwicz said. David saw the major was a nervous wreck. “My messages, even the programs I watch, the games I play, are scanned by that grotesque artificial intelligence Big Aleph.”

Seinwicz shook his head.

“The IDF has become a chimera of stormtroopers and Roman legionnaires. To paraphrase Orwell, because of the occupation, our only future is that of a boot stomping on an Arab face, forever.”

He squinted at Jordan on the benighted horizon and summed up, “I’m not doing it anymore.”

“Where will you go?” was all David could think to ask.

“Anywhere different. Everywhere,” Seinwicz said, getting up. He straightened himself and his dusty uniform. “Perhaps Easter Island. My old professor is uncovering hundreds of stone head statues that sank into the ocean. People think the society just vanished around 1700. New evidence shows Rapa Nui was decimated by colonists and slavery but managed to live

on. There are thousands of Rapa Nui people alive today. The society isn't gone; I'd like to find them."

David thought of things he could tell Seinwicz, things that would save lives.

"You know my father is chief rabbi."

"We're not all that religious," Seinwicz said, perhaps expecting a Torah-based argument on why he should listen.

"Not many people know he's also one of the world's leading experts in classical philology. He was reading Egyptian before he learned English. He even insisted we all learn some Greek. Man, did I hate that.

"When I graduated high school, he took me on a Worldwide Help International-sponsored trip to sunken ruins off Mavros in the Aegean Sea. They predate any organized civilization yet discovered."

"I've never heard of them."

"The results were never published; they took custody of all my father's notes and pictures before we left. The only parts of the city that survived were a ziggurat and an altar. The capstone had a single word in an unknown language etched on it.

"They puzzled over it for many months. With the rabbi's help, they determined it was equivalent to the Greek term *holokautein*. This is a specific type of sacrifice in which the victim is burnt up by flames and utterly destroyed. It is the source of the word *holocaust*."

David extended his hand. It was time to leave Fort Jericho.

"After you get through digging that trench," David said, motioning to the D9 bulldozer working below, "dig another two hundred meters out and another after that. Then take those shipping containers from over there, bury them in layers: dirt, logs, dirt, logs. Put your best troops inside them."

"Why would I do that?"

"To make sure some of them survive long enough to make a counterattack. In front of what I've seen coming, these walls will fall."

Two Shin Bet thugs escorted him off Jericho base. They were the same guys David had beaten up in the toilets. Not wanting to get into a wrestling match, he led the way into an empty guard shack.

“I just want to thank you wonderful people from Internal Security for being so pro—”

They hit him with solid gut punches, one each, followed by some half-hearted knees and elbows.

As they left, one of them said, “Have a nicer day tomorrow.”

David was curled in a ball, having a bit of a retch, but managed a wave and a thumbs-up. A heavy key ring and security fob hit him on the head. He looked at it. A real vehicle, not a diseased camel.

“You’re both—*urgh*—back on my Hanukkah list.”

When he felt okay to stand, he opened the Special Operations shed. Inside was a Ripclaw high-speed all-terrain vehicle as well as an unexpected bonus: a Pelican case marked “Holo camouflage suit – Qualified personnel only.”

“Dave,” Miss Aleph said. “What do you think Major Seinwicz will say about me in his report to the chief of general staff?”

He hauled the tarp off the wickedest-looking off-road vehicle in service with any military.

“Are you serious?”

“I only did what you asked.”

“The country is under attack, two weapons of mass destruction are missing, and you’re worried about your IDF reputation? You need your self-preservation program deleted.”

The Ripclaw ATV was in perfect condition. It still had that new from-the-arms-dealer’s-showroom-floor smell to it. Shin Bet got all the best toys, the nut-huggers. He filled every space with supplies and gear from the Special Ops shed shelves, then opened the garage door.

The only way was south toward the Dead Sea then Highway 1 West to Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

Where the hell is the air force?

He drove out. The tank-style treads tore into the hard-packed sand and accelerated like a sports car.

“Dave, if Israel does fall, and I shall do my very best to see it does not, but if it should, do you think I’ll be taken prisoner?”

“I don’t know, Miss Aleph,” David said. He expanded and contracted his chest to check if the Shin Bet guys had broken anything. “Do you speak Farsi Persian?”

34

NEAR BIR NABALA JUDEA & SAMARIA / WEST BANK

LIA

“Identifitsirovat.”

The odd-looking night-vision device Eitan had taken from the bomber’s pocket was still speaking. There were five colored buttons: blue, white, green, yellow, red, and a bigger one with a mystery label. Lia regularly programmed weapons systems for the IDF. This felt like a friend-foe query, the way units identified enemies in the field. Messing this up would not mean embarrassment—it would mean a rocket-propelled grenade through their windshield.

Russian writing was left to right, the opposite of Hebrew and Arabic. She guessed the first button on the left would be the most frequently used. Hopefully.

“Identifitsirovat.”

No more time to debate. She pressed the blue button.

“What’s going on?” Spencer asked.

“It’s cool,” Lia said, sure things were not cool at all. “Just a handshake to whoever is on the ridge over there. I think they are beaming UV or infrared laser signals at us to see if we are friend or foe.”

“Infra-what?” Steph asked.

Lia drove steadily. No one blew them up.

“This must be the device the Grey Wolves use to communicate and

organize attacks.”

“They’re the ones screwing up the radios,” Eitan said, catching on quickly. “That was why headquarters sent me to deliver a message in person to Major Baumann. The comms were unreliable.”

“They must be getting their hardware from Russia. The little mechBrain inside only speaks one language,” Lia said, scanning the road ahead. “Blue means ‘friend.’ The rest of the colors are for organizing attacks quickly. The big one must be for voice communication through laser modulation. Press to speak, like a walkie-talkie.”

She steered onto the shoulder of the road to avoid a burned-out station wagon.

“That means in order to talk,” Eitan said, “the two parties have to be in line of sight, like my full-body video game,” Eitan said. “It won’t work if I’m in the can.”

“That’s a limitation,” Lia said, imagining how this device would be used by the enemy. “But the advantage of this style of communications is it would be hard to jam and almost impossible to eavesdrop on. It could be how the Grey Wolves got so deep into Israeli territory so fast.”

“We’ll get them back in the end,” Eitan said. “We always do.”

They were challenged by Grey Wolf units three more times on the road to Jerusalem. The next two times were the same. During the final long-distance handshake, things got interesting.

They neared the outskirts of Beit Hanina, a Palestinian neighborhood in the east part of the capital. The night-vision device spoke again, this time a whole sentence.

“Tibbi malzeme var mı.”

“What is that, Farsi?” Steph asked.

It was not Russian.

Lia pressed the blue button to indicate “friend.”

The voice repeated. The sound was screechy and indistinct because the analog sound was being transferred by laser through the windshield. The

voice sounded more insistent.

Again, Lia pressed blue.

There was no other way to bluff. She did not know what language to speak. Let them think her voice transmitter was malfunctioning.

The Grey Wolves let them pass.

The highways into Jerusalem were not blocked off by the Green Line security wall. That would have made things too inconvenient. Instead, Israel's government had built walls around Palestinian towns and neighborhoods like Bir Nabala. The residents were basically imprisoned. Outside the barriers, the major roads were all "yellow plates only."

A low rumbling came from the direction of Jerusalem and Bir Nabala. Normally during an intifada, if you heard that, you went in the opposite direction. Lia had to get through this area. It was the only good way to the city center and Musrara district, where she had to go.

"Ah!" She blinked and turned her head. Bright arc lights flashed, lighting up the interchange, turning the night-vision display screen bright green.

"What is it?"

"Tanks," Lia said. "A lot of them."

She pulled over and zoomed in. It looked like an entire brigade of heavy armor supported by light infantry. She looked for markings. It was a full battalion of the 188th Lightning Armored Brigade. They were from Northern Regional Command. What were they doing down here in central Israel? They could not have gotten all the way here in the few hours since the alert.

"Let's see if they're just moving through."

"Finally!" Spencer rejoiced, but only for a moment until Lia told them her plan.

"We're not going over to them?" the American said, crestfallen.

"Let's just watch for now."

Lia was afraid the IDF would stop her from going to Jerusalem. The commander could order her to stay with the brigade and help reprogram their

software systems. If she was pressed into service, she would be separated from her companions, and who knew when she'd be allowed to get back on the road to find her parents.

It was possible the 188th were on their way to protect the Knesset. Israel's parliament was located a few kilometers away in Jerusalem to the west of Musrara and the Old City. Lia counted thirty-five main line Merkavas. These did not move on. They dug in by the highway. That also was odd. Tanks were up north and down south for a reason. They worked best on flat, open terrain. Once in a while they would send a few into built-up urban areas like Hebron or Gaza City but only if the Army needed to intimidate people after air strikes.

"Should we go around?" Eitan asked.

Spencer gave a short frustrated intake of breath at this suggestion. In Utah seeing a group of National Guards would mean they were saved; here, things were a bit more complex.

"Sneaking away is not a good idea," Lia said cautiously. They had fooled the Grey Wolves, but IDF might think they were insurgents as well. "They will have armed drones watching the perimeter."

Air support might view them as a hostile VBIED, a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device.

"Let's go up there." Lia steered the creaking Mercedes SUV to a rise above the freeway interchange. The interchange was the only place in this hilly area where tanks could get into formation.

Lia stopped in a parking lot. It belonged to a day school for elementary kids from the suburb enclave farther up the hill. She thought she saw a light in one of the windows. It was quickly put out.

The sky to the east lit up.

"Holy..." Eitan said.

Rolling fireballs came from the direction of the wall that separated the Shuafat Palestinians from the Jewish suburbs of East Jerusalem.

Lia saw flashes of small-arms fire a minute or two later. Scattered bands of people came over the rise backlit by the fires they had set to houses and cars in their path. They were fighting like thugs or a mob, not a disciplined army.

Eitan borrowed the monocle. "This should be over fast."

The tanks aimed their turret guns toward the oncoming Arab militia. IDF infantry got behind the line of tanks and waited for the order to shoot.

"What's all that?" Eitan said, pointing at the dark foothills.

Lia took the monocle back. A flurry of lights were blinking in the rises all around. Only Lia could see them. They flashed green, yellow, green. Yellow, green, green. When all the ones she could see flashed green, they switched to red.

From all sides of the tank formation, small-arms fire erupted. Some hit the outlying IDF sentries. They returned fire smartly and fell back to cover.

Tracer fire from machine guns mounted on the Merkavas raked the foothills.

"Out, out, out," Lia cried, kicking open the door of the Mercedes.

The tanks were laying down fire 360 degrees around them. Lia had to get everyone behind something that would stop a heavy machine gun bullet. Lia found a hole in a parking lot wall and watched the action below.

Rifle fire from the insurgents became more sporadic. It was replaced by dozens of popping sounds. Small objects landed inside the circle of tanks.

The little shapes landed and started moving on their own, like robotic model cars. An Israeli soldier stamped down on one with a booted foot, and the thing erupted like a Roman candle firework. The uniformed figure fell back, leg engulfed in sticky flame.

Maybe the brigade commander saw the danger, or maybe not. It was too late. The small remote-controlled sabotage devices ducked underneath tanks and started burning through the floorplates, melting into the treads, and threatening to ignite fuel tanks.

A dozen tanks caught fire before the infantry got organized. They tried to sweep the bots away with long poles or shoot at them.

One stricken flaming tank's turret started to rotate wildly. It fired its main gun over and over. The crew inside were either dead or burning alive. It shot at a car across the freeway. It shot the tank next to it. Then it aimed right up at Lia.

The high explosive shell went screaming over their heads and hit the building behind them. Hot metal and shattered concrete peppered them, followed by a choking cloud of dust.

"Hey! Hey!" Lia said into the gloom as she choked for breath. "Everyone okay?"

"Here."

Spencer.

"Okay."

Steph.

"Eitan?" Lia yelled.

Silence.

Down on the freeway interchange, an undamaged tank shot the malfunctioning rogue at close range. The turret blew off. They had to kill their own tank and sacrifice the men inside to save their formation.

Even under extreme pressure, the Israeli forces remained disciplined. They were getting things under control. Flame-extinguishing foam jetted out from fire-suppression systems. Less than half of the tanks were visibly damaged.

In the air, three attack helicopters materialized. They had been holding back in stealth mode, and now started attacking the hills with precise fire. Sensors and AIs onboard must have located the heat signatures of the hidden insurgents. They were taking them out all at once.

Lia found Eitan under some dust and debris. His arm was nearly torn off. A gaping wound was pumping blood into the dirt.

"Get a flashlight over here and some cloth," Lia yelled.

Eitan was stunned and out of it. Probably a good thing. She didn't need him struggling as she and Spencer tried to stop the bleeding.

“I got my first-aid ticket at the sawmill,” Spencer said, looking at the wounded boy. “Man, I never—”

“Get something white,” Lia said. “The tank brigade. They’ve got an advanced medical unit down there. We have to show them we’re not a threat. We have to get Eitan to the doctors.”

Just then, one of the helicopters exploded. It started a slow, sickening arc down and slammed into a hillside. Lia looked up. Dozens of insurgent drones darted through the air. These were siblings of the rolling bots that had been sent against the tanks. Like fireflies swarming around two eagles, they followed the remaining IDF copters as they tried to maneuver away.

A second helo caught fire. The last zoomed away, deploying flares and countermeasures.

Down on the cloverleaf freeway interchange, suicide bombers attacked the armored column. In cars, on foot, on motorbikes, and even bicycles, they came. Ducked down over their handlebars, the sight was unmistakable. Lia had seen a dozen training videos, but it was no preparation.

The Shahid martyr squads came directly down from the hills, so fast that infantry had to scramble to respond. Lia thought she could hear their battle screams. Or maybe it was the ringing in her ears from the tank shell explosion.

Most of the bombers were stopped. Defending against martyrdom attacks was part of IDF basic training. The 188th were elite regular forces.

Because of the confusion caused by the incendiary robot attacks, a few got through. One skinny guy on a motorized scooter ran head first into a Merkava. He thudded against the frontal armor plate and lay there like a squashed bug with a football-sized lump on his back. It looked like the device Raem had tried to blow them all up with back at the Palestinian Authority camp.

Lia looked for a way to get Eitan down there. So many things were burning, she switched the scope to daylight mode. No sooner had she found

the medical truck when she had to jerk her eyepiece down.

A small sun blossomed among the Merkavas. The wall she was hiding behind heaved and wobbled. Instant dawn lit up the floor of the valley. A ferocious thermal blast came after the all-illuminating flash. One of those things must have gone off. Raem had not set off an ammo dump back there. The small device alone had caused destruction equivalent to a 10,000-pound bomb.

Backing away from the cinderblock wall, scared it might fall, Lia looked up. An oily fireball was ascending into the night sky. The tank formation, the medical corps armored vehicles, all of it was gone. In their place was a crater, melted into the asphalt rimmed with orange fire.

She ducked down and found the wounded Eitan.

Spencer was near panic. "I can't get the tourniquet to stay."

Eitan's humerus bone was nearly broken in two. The gash there was the source of the worst bleeding.

"It has to come off."

"What?"

Lia did not explain. She grabbed Eitan's limp arm.

"Hold him."

It felt like a dead piece of meat. She levered it against her foot and broke the bone the rest of the way. She needed something to cut with.

They had taken her damn knife. There might be something in the Mercedes. No time. She bit. Eitan's blood gushed over her lips. The last bit of shirt, skin, fat, and gristle ripped, and the boy's left arm came off.

Eitan half woke. "Gwarrs?" he said in a stupor.

Lia turned his face away from the missing limb.

The stump twitched as Eitan tried to move his arm. He was weak from blood loss, but at least she had gotten the splintered bone out of the way and sealed off the jaggedly ruptured artery.

"See if you can find some ice," Lia said, spitting gore.

Steph grabbed a flashlight and stumbled back toward the demolished elementary school building behind them.

Lia and Spencer had just managed to get Eitan into the SUV when Steph returned. Her face was as ashen as the dust covering it. She held a small cooler loosely in her hands. It was covered with Disney cartoon characters.

“It... it was some kids’ party, maybe a birthday. In the school. There was a bomb shelter in the basement. They probably thought it was safer to spend the night there. They’re all dead. I just saw blood coming from under the shelter door.”

Lia did not have any equipment. There were no fire trucks. By the looks of things, none were coming. Down on the freeway insurgents were killing any wounded Israeli soldiers they could find, shooting them or rolling them into pools of burning tank fuel.

“We have to go.”

She took the cartoon-covered cooler. After tossing out the drinks and ice cream, Lia folded Eitan’s severed arm on top of the ice.

Lia stowed the box and drove. The fire marking the tank graveyard glowed in the Mercedes’s rearview mirror. They passed over a rise, and the flames disappeared like dawn in retreat.

35

ROYAL COMPOUND AMMAN JORDAN

TEMIR

Temir's boot crunched on newly glassed earth. The sound made a racket in the amphitheater that had been formed by the smoldering entrance to the Jordanian royals' skyscraper. Not loud enough.

"We are Grey Wolves!" he yelled at the last defenders hiding behind sandbags and rubble. "The new Fedayeen. Come out and die like men, you cowards!"

The ruling royal family of Jordan kept special hangars holding planes, fueled and ready for takeoff, around the clock. Ever since Yasser Arafat and Palestinian factions had launched a coup in 1970, the Hashemite monarchy had lived in a state of paranoia which forced them to keep continuously open the option of escape.

Those planes and the airport around them were the first things Temir had ordered blown up. The royals and their loyalists in the armed forces were trapped. They hadn't realized what was happening until the capital city of Amman was in flames. Now they were cornered in their urban skyscraper palace.

"Out! Root and stem," Temir yelled in Arabic. "I'll rip you out this night." He wanted the last holdouts to know their doom was coming.

That their doom...

Time slowed. His heightened senses let him see each individual dust particle in the air. Something moved at the enemy position. A round object came hurtling at him out of the dark.

A grenade. It landed near Temir's feet with a small thump.

He smirked.

He heard the thrower's panting breath. Temir sensed the fearful thumping heartbeats of his attackers. They were fifty meters away. The grenade's fuse engaged. It was an RGD-5 fragmentation type. He counted.

Five.

Four.

His hand darted down and picked up the grenade.

Three.

With a side-arm throw, he could have sent it back over the concrete wall his ambushers were hiding behind. It would explode in midair, causing maximum casualties.

Two.

He decided he wanted to kill them one by one. With this type of grenade, the detonator twisted out counterclockwise. It was removable in order to switch out the timed one for a booby-trap version with a zero-delay fuse.

He twisted. It was stuck. He tried harder. Too late now to throw it! With enhanced muscle power and inhumanly strong ligaments, his hands latched on like vise-grip pliers.

One.

Temir jerked the detonator out of the main explosive just as it ignited. Like a weak firework, it fizzled out.

His people were behind him; they had been watching. Turkish Grey Wolves, Iraqi Sunni, Palestinians from Jordanian refugee camps. They saw. Already blood-drunk after their blitzkrieg destruction of the Jordanian border defenses, his display of invincibility drove them into a frenzy. They dropped

their rifles and charged the petrified enemy with knives, rocks, iron bars, and bared teeth.

They sacked the royal palace and left no one alive.

The last of the Hashemite line was a girl. Maybe a teenager. Definitely pregnant. Temir found her cowering near the balcony of her bedroom. He picked her up. She weighed no more than a stuffed toy.

The nightdress she had on, it stopped Temir cold. The girl's clothes billowed just as Nazeema's white wedding dress had. The village sheikh had proclaimed them husband and wife, and joyously a gun had fired into the air. The blank fired by her father's old musket started off the Zaghrouta ululation singing battle between bridesmaids.

Those were memories. Not the future. There was only one future for him. For this white-clad Hashemite princess, none at all.

As he held the little royal waif, she must have thought she was in the arms of a statue. To her his enhanced muscles and bones and the symbiont under his shirt must have felt like marble. He regained himself and stepped forward. Gently, as though dropping a lily into a pond, he sent her over the railing and down to the courtyard three hundred feet below.

Pausing only to grab advanced optics from the neck of a dead palace guard, he ascended to the top tower. Temir zoomed in. Directly west stood a long fortification. It was the Israeli border, the concrete-and-iron wall of Jericho.

36

THE FORMER IRAQ

ELLIE

“The Iraqi politicians stole all the money, kicked the Americans out, and the Iraqi Shi’a faction opened the southeastern border to their buddies in the Islamic Republic of Iran.”

Captain Atticus had a direct way of summarizing complicated international news. *Maybe he has a future in broadcast journalism*, Ellie thought.

“How much did they get?” Nobu asked.

“A lot,” Sarge Bryan said. “But it was more of a kick in the teeth to be told to leave after thousands of Americans lost their lives and tens of thousands were wounded trying to keep this place together.”

“Washington finally had to support Kurdish independence,” Atticus said. “It was the right thing to do.”

“They’re carving off pieces of Iraq like it’s a Thanksgiving turkey,” Bryan said, spitting politely to the side of the road. “Soon there’ll be nothing left.”

Ellie had just managed to digest the animosity the Turkish PKK had for their fellow Kurds in Iraq. The centuries-old feud fueling the civil war between Sunni Iraqis and Shi’a Iraqis was a bit much to take in.

“Not our worry,” Atticus said. “We will get to a friendly area and wait for an airlift out to Kurdistan.”

Mr. Perdix pointed to a figure in the distance. “Do you think that fellow up

there might have a car we can buy?”

Ever since they had crossed the border from Turkey into Iraq, the DARPA scientist had been dragging himself along. He looked like he wanted to hop on the back of a MULE. Ellie’s right buttock was cramping up, but she wasn’t going to be the first to clamber onto the back of a mechanical donkey.

“Nope,” Bryan said, scanning the distant meadow with his cybernetic eyes. “Just someone tending sheep.”

“Even if he did have a car, I wouldn’t buy it from him,” Atticus said. “Anyone here who shows up with unexpected money gets robbed or is suspected of smuggling, most likely both. We let him be.”

Nobu appeared from his recon jog.

“Yo, Capt’n,” he said. “Check this out.”

Atticus gestured to the MULEs. The robot pack animals understood his hand signals as well as a dog would. Both of them trotted to the tree line and sank down on their four spindly legs.

“You all can stay here with them,” Atticus said to Ellie. “This is probably nothing.”

“Not on your life, Captain,” Ellie said. She clambered up the slope after the recon party and promptly slipped on a pine cone and went thudding painfully onto her knees.

On the other side of a densely treed rise, they looked down into a shallow valley. There was nothing in it.

“Wait...” Nobu said. “There.”

Ellie spotted a brief flash of sunlight, as though someone were holding a mirror.

“It’s a big truck,” Sarge Bryan said after a minute. “Eighteen-wheeler at least. Hidden under an active camouflage tarp.” He blinked his electric-blue eyes. “Now I can see it. I had to switch to something called wave-delta view.”

“They installed that during your latest ocular upgrade,” Nobu said. “It

interpolates the return of two different wavelengths, for example, infrared and gamma. Sweet.”

He clearly knew more about Bryan’s eyes than the sergeant did.

“How’d you spot them?” Ellie asked.

“There was a long-range military-style delivery drone that flew in,” Nobu said. “Local Iraqis probably don’t do much online shopping, so I figured the recipient deserved a closer look.”

Ellie gathered they were looking at a truck that was hidden under a magical tarp.

“Russians?” Nobu suggested.

“Even for them, this is cutting-edge tech,” Mr. Perdix said. “This area of the world is not a priority for them. They are more concerned with countering the Chinese in Djoboro.”

“Could be our own people? SEALs have gadgets Army doesn’t see till years later,” Atticus said. “And it would be just like Navy Special Forces to keep an op going after we were officially kicked out.”

“Only one way to find out,” Sarge said, grabbing his rifle.

“Gents,” Ellie blurted out, surprising herself a little. “Do you think that’s the best way?”

“Ms. Sato,” Mr. Perdix said, “we’d all be happy to have your input—when we’re riding in that nice air-conditioned truck.”

Atticus held up his hand. Nobu and Sarge stopped instantly. “You were saying?”

“I agree speed is of the essence,” Ellie said, trying to recall any useful details about military tactics from her brief time addicted to playing *Command Strike Online*. “After their drone visit, they will be on alert, just in case it was spotted. What if there’s gunfire? These hills seem empty now...”

Atticus got the gist of what she was saying. “Any noise and local people will come to have a look-see.”

“I think there’s a more optimal strategy,” Ellie said. “It requires a local

phrase book, a bucket, and Marwood.”

A few minutes later, Ellie was wandering down the hill toward the truck. It was still covered by the high-tech invisibility netting, so after a bit, she could only estimate its position. That was just as well, as it helped her act as though she did not know she was traipsing toward undoubtedly murderous and hostile people.

“Steady on, Marwood,” she whispered to the capuchin monkey. He was riding inside the bucket as though he was on a carnival ride. At least someone was having fun.

The monkey gave a screech. A man in green fatigues seemed to step out of nowhere.

All right, Ellie, show time!

“*Min ’anti?*” she challenged the outsider right away, as a local would have done.

Ellie had a cloth over her hair and forehead. At a distance her skin and Eurasian features should pass for local.

The fellow took his hand off his gun. He started to speak.

She cut across him straight off. “*Walidi wa’ashqayiyin qaribun jida!*”

A lone woman would immediately mention her father and brothers were near, no matter what the facts were. She had practiced Arabic with a Kurdish accent for all of a minute with the help of a computer translator. Any mistakes would be attributed to her speaking Kurdish as a first language, as was typical in northern Iraq. That was the plan.

The man was a fit-looking military fellow, probably in his twenties. He turned to a companion. They spoke to each other, which was good, because Ellie was in no way ready to start a dialogue.

She stepped at an angle, trying to appear as though she was continuing down the road and only casually curious. Ellie waved.

“Ana jame almiah.”

Just getting some water. Me and my little helper monkey.

The soldier under the cover could have been the twin of the first. He barked something harsh. His associate shrugged and began to casually screw an accessory onto his weapon. It was a silencer.

“Oh bloody gosh darn!” She knew she had done it now. “I mean: *Ana jame almiah!* Right?”

Her sudden burst of English and Marwood’s screeching distracted the pair long enough.

Whunk! Whunk!

Atticus and Sarge Bryan had time to come up behind the hostile pair and fire stunning rounds. Nobu and Corporal Singh dashed forward and relieved the two downed men of their weapons.

Still incensed by their causal willingness to shoot a harmless village girl, Ellie stood over the semiconscious pair and yelled the only thing they might understand.

“Walidi wa’ashqayiyin qaribun jida!”

Marwood shared the same sentiment. He dug down into the bucket he rode inside and threw his poo at them.

“Who are they?” Ellie said after the men had searched around and found no one else.

She was not sorry for them at all as they lay tightly trussed up and dripping monkey filth.

“IDs say Worldwide Help International volunteers,” Sarge Bryan said.

“Fake.”

“Not as far as I can tell,” Mr. Perdix said, examining the travel documents.

Ellie remembered some breaking regional news. “There was a large relief convoy heading down from Turkey to where there was fighting, famine, and disease. Hundreds of trucks.”

Atticus looked in the back of the eighteen-wheel truck. “What’s the load?”

“Looks legit,” Nobu reported from the back of a large hauling van, the same type you’d see on highways anywhere in Europe. “Some Pelican cases

of medicine, the rest is flour, rice, water filters, and emergency protein rations. At least we won't starve waiting for a chopper exfil."

"WWHI has more volunteers than the Red Cross and Red Crescent combined," Ellie said. "I don't think they'd send murderous thugs. These fellows must have hijacked the load and been intent on selling it."

"There's one way to find out," Mr. Perdix said in that scientific way that gave her chills. He dug into a small pack attached to the side of a MULE.

Atticus glanced at her. "I don't think..."

"Just a little inducer." The DARPA man picked up his hypodermic injection gun and selected a setting on a color-coded dial. The stripes ranged from light pink to black. "To make them more eloquent."

"I, for one, as the person who was nearly 'taken out,'" said Ellie, "would like to know what these chaps are all about."

The syringe hissed against the neck of the closest one. Neither of them could move their arms or their legs. The interrogation subject's eyes glazed over while the other one watched, raging impotently against his bindings.

Atticus's mobile computer had translation software in it. There was no intelligible reply to any of the questions until they switched from Iraqi Arabic to Turkish.

"Sometimes, under the influence, people only respond to their first languages," Mr. Perdix explained.

"*Grikurt!*" the man mumbled.

Mr. Perdix shook his head. The auto-translator was stumped.

"*Yeniden doğmak!*"

"Let's just give them a nice drugged-out nap time and be on our way," Sarge suggested. "This is—"

Suddenly, the second man, who they had not yet drugged, started foaming at the mouth and convulsing. With his last ounce of strength, he rolled over and clamped his teeth onto the drugged man's neck. The sound of him biting was like teeth sinking through the skin of an apple.

OUTSKIRTS OF JERUSALEM

LIA

“The kid’s lost a lot of blood!” Spencer said.

Lia shot a look at the back seat of the decrepit Mercedes SUV. The American was holding Eitan, whose face looked ghastly pale green in the light that spilled in from the dimly lit street.

“Just keep the bindings tight,” Lia said. *Not good.* Eitan needed top-level trauma care, not bungee cords and torn T-shirts.

Thirty kilometers was the old wreck’s top speed. Lia knew that. She jammed the accelerator down to the rusted floor anyway. Behind them were homicidal maniacs who had just taken out an entire Israeli tank battalion.

Steph was holding Eitan’s feet. Spencer monitored his breathing and kept pressure on the stump of his left arm.

“We’ll get him to a hospital.”

Lia looked over to the passenger seat. There was the little icebox holding Eitan’s severed arm, folded up tight. Only a few hours ago, the smartass teen had been delivering crappy pizza. Then he ran a message for David. Now he might die.

“Steph, find my IDF ID. It’s back there. Clean the blood off.”

“There’s blood everywhere.” Steph was starting to freak out.

“Don’t waste water. Clean it with your spit if you have to. If we get

stopped, we want assistance, not delays.” *Or bullets and shrapnel.*

Lia had her blue Israeli civilian ID in her pocket. This listed her maiden name Suleiman and listed her as Bedouin Christian. Sometimes that was the one to show. The green holograph-sealed military ID might be the key to getting Eitan to a mobile hospital or airlifted to Hadassah, the best medical center in the region.

The two big hospitals she knew how to get to were Hadassah and Shaare Zedek. Going to either would take her away from Musrara and the Canada House disaster shelter, where her parents were.

Hadassah was on the east side of Jerusalem. During the 1948 war and up until 1967, it had been in the Jordanian-controlled part of Jerusalem. Getting there directly would take them past the Shuafat refugee camp. It was too dangerous. Shaare Zedek was on the other side of the Knesset, even farther away from her parents’ neighborhood.

“I know where to go,” Lia said. She recalled that during her officer training they told her to always sound confident. “We got this. Hang on.”

The Mercedes had no power steering. Mysterious Palestinian parts gamely chugged away under the hood. They crept along the silent suburban streets.

Lia wanted to scream. How the *fuck* did it get like this? When David had dashed out, she had been sitting in a house by herself with Khóshekh, their Bombay rescue cat.

This was no ordinary local uprising. The tactics and equipment the enemy was using. The laser communication devices to bypass radio signals jamming. That horror weapon Raem had tried to blow them up with. It was all too sophisticated and well planned. For the first time, Lia feared Israel itself might fall.

Until 1967, miles of barbed wire had cut the capital city in half. From towers and minarets, Jordanian snipers picked off Jews in their quarter as they went shopping and hung laundry. Those fresh scars of conflict were layered over ones as old as Mount Moriah.

The SUV finally crossed the 1949 A.M. stice line out of the West Bank. Only a small green historical road sign marked the border of the historical Governorate. They had made it to modern Jerusalem.

A few civilians ran one way or another. Most carried containers. Likely water, food, or medicine, whatever they needed to bring back to their people in bomb shelters or basements.

“Can we ask them?” Spencer asked breathlessly. He sounded like he was close to going into adrenaline hangover shock.

As an American, Spencer simply didn’t know what he was asking. This was not like the aftermath of a hurricane in Florida. Here, not everything was what it seemed. Even a few hours could make a difference. People who smiled at you in the morning could stab or shoot you in the afternoon. This storm in the Holy Land was just beginning.

“Let me decide.” Lia was frustrated and in a cold sweat.

Down the next street, they saw a vehicle driving at a measured pace.

“Look,” Steph rasped hopefully through her dry throat.

“I’m not going near it until I make positive identification.”

It was also a Mercedes, a sleek new white sprinter bus. Painted neatly on its side was the logo of a snake around a stick. The red rod of Asclepius. “Worldwide Help International” was written on the side in English, Arabic, Russian, and Hebrew. The big NGO operated in every country and always appeared near disasters.

“If it’s an ambulance, we have to flag it.”

“No, Steph, we don’t,” Lia said firmly. Something creeped her out. Maybe it was the slow speed it was moving at. Or the fact this non-Israeli NGO was already operating deep in the capital without an IDF escort. “Give me a second.”

Lia zoomed in with her night-vision monocle. The WWHI vehicle stopped. Two unarmed people got out. They walked over to a lump on the sidewalk. A body. Without checking for vitals, they picked it up like a sack of rice and

tossed it in the back of the ambulance.

“Well?” Steph said.

“It... doesn’t look right.”

The ambulance kept meandering along. Lia followed it, keeping distance. It turned left toward the Knesset parliament compound. On its roof were lidar sensor scanners.

Why would they be interested only in corpses? Was it camouflage if they were stopped by IDF? They could pretend they were picking up wounded who had unfortunately died, while they did whatever they were really doing.

“It’s gone!” Steph said. “Why did you—”

“Trust me. We go on to Shaare Tsedk.”

38

OUTSIDE JERICHO GARRISON JUDEA & SAMARIA

DAVID

David Baumann raced south, parallel to the Israel-Jordan border wall. The souped-up Ripclaw armored all-terrain vehicle tore over uneven ground and dunes.

His side jostled painfully against the mass of weapons and supplies piled on the passenger seat. The Shin Bet internal security heavies had done David the favor of not breaking any of his ribs during their payback pounding.

Ahead were the fastest roads to get to Tel Aviv and back to Lia. He had decided his wife's programming skills would be the most valuable help he could get in finding his brother and sorting out the mess he had made. He was sure Prime Minister Drach could not be involved, and he did not know what, if any, role his father the cabinet minister had in whatever was going on.

The friend-foe identifier lit up green. It was a jet.

"Finally, Air Force gets its ass in gear."

He looked at Miss Aleph, who was perched on the dash.

"Who is that up there? Can they beam us real-time images of Hebron or Tel Aviv?"

Still out of sight, the jet's engine noises howled over the night landscape.

"No. I'm unable to link with the aircraft's AI. They may have been instructed to ignore ground signals given the jamming and virus-infected interference flooding all the networks."

Air power had always been the ace in Israel's defense. Total air supremacy was a cornerstone of their fighting doctrine. The 1967 Six-Day War had been won in the first three hours when they destroyed the entire Egyptian air force on the ground.

The downside was the pilots tended to be elitist turd heads who were disdainful of listening to ground commanders.

"Keep trying," David said as he searched for the turnoff to head down out of the Territories. "Did you get any updates at all while you were connected to Jericho base's computers?"

"In Tel Aviv, firefighters and emergency crews are responding to scattered explosions and violence.

"We've cut electricity to Gaza and reinforced the border walls around the Strip.

"There are reports of large explosions and loss of communications in Haifa.

"Nazareth is under the highest level of civilian alert.

"Jerusalem IDF units are attempting to quell violence on the Temple Mount and resolve a standoff in the area of the Dome of the Rock Islamic shrine."

This was an intifada on steroids, but nothing the country had not been through before and survived.

"Any clue who's behind this? Use the intuition and suspiciousness algorithm Lia wrote for you."

"No group or country has claimed responsibility."

Lebanon, Syria, and of course Jordan had their own domestic problems.

"Iraq is at the tipping point of disintegration. Iranian armored divisions have taken most of the territory from Basrah in the south to Baghdad in the middle of the country.

"Shi'a militia forces have welcomed the Iranian forces. Together, they are destroying Sunni resistance. The capital of Baghdad appears split between East held by the Iranians and the West held by Sunni militia. An unidentified force has resisted them fiercely and fought them to a standstill.

"My speculative paranoia filters would naturally suspect the Iranians of seeking to undermine the Jewish State by any means at their disposal.

"However, commander-in-chief of the Iranian Armed Forces, General Masjed, is a graduate of the Hellenic Military Academy. He is as cautious and methodical as he is ruthless. It is unlikely he would start a war with Israel before digesting whatever part of Iraq the Iranians ultimately decide to annex.

"That leaves our usual suspects: Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Burning Flame of the Prophet."

Even in private conversation with his AI, David did not want to mention the Daggers of Ehud. They were extremists, but they were Jews first. They would not wreck their own country to usher in the messianic Apocalyptic

Holy War to end all Holy Wars. However, he could not help the feeling that they were somehow involved.

What about Boaz? If an Israeli atom bomb went off, it would jeopardize all international friendships and alliances they had.

“Keep trying to text and call Lia,” David said, adding: “And my idiot brother. Anything else?”

“The soccer match between Barcelona and Real Madrid has been rescheduled after fans threw hundreds of pig heads onto the field.”

On the ATV’s side window, blobs of tint appeared. David hoped the vehicle was not malfunctioning.

“Why is the side window doing that?”

“Hold me so I can see with the sensors you haven’t destroyed.”

After a few seconds, Miss Aleph said, “There’s no problem. The electro-chromatic glass is responding to bursts of ultraviolet light.”

“It’s nighttime.”

It must be man-made illumination. It was coming from the direction of the border wall on David’s left.

“Could it be IDF activity?”

“The wavelength corresponds to no known IDF frequency.”

David stopped the vehicle at a right angle to the road.

“Enhance thermal imaging.”

“Dave, you’re worrying me.”

“If Israel doesn’t use the frequency, they’re not likely to detect it,” he said. Using the smart glass, he zoomed in on the indistinct images in front of the border wall.

“There.” David’s knuckles hit the glass. “What’s that?”

Hot spots glowed white and orange. Colder-than-background elements were darker blue. It looked like a line of camouflaged infantry, hundreds of them. Only IDF had that kind of personal cloaking technology, and they never used it on mass deployments.

“Flip the contrast. I want to see cold spots.”

There was an indistinct line, about five hundred meters long, right along

the base of the border wall. They were moving toward Fort Jericho. Major Seinwicz and all his observers were looking east into Jordan. What if the main insurgent force was already here? Jericho was less than ten miles from the replenishment pipelines leading to the Dead Sea. The ones that had been shut down for maintenance.

“Get a line to Seinwicz or anyone at Fort Jericho.”

“All-band interference has increased. Do you think those are enemy units?”

“There’s only one way to mask thermal when you’re moving, and that’s with persistent cooling into a heat sink. These could be a large number of infantry interspersed with insulated electric vehicles.”

Over in Jordan there were more than two million Palestinians. Israeli military planners worried about the chaos that could erupt if even a small percentage of them, the ones living in refugee camps for generations since 1948, ever got their hands on modern weapons.

In Judea and Samaria, there were three million noncitizen Arabs. Gaza had two million. If radical Islamists among those seven million Palestinians ever coordinated their attacks...

“Boost Harris gain to maximum,” David yelled. “I don’t care if you burn the battery out. Get through to Fort Jericho before he’s bushwhacked by this stealth enemy column.”

Miss Aleph made the radio whine and vibrate under the dashboard. David took manual control of the ATV’s weapons.

The force moving undetected along the Israeli side of the border wall were using ultraviolet lasers to communicate and coordinate their strike. There had to be a similar group coming from north or west. Swarming doctrine held that once the target was engaged, other groups would flock to the area. Each fighting cell would act independently but with a unity of purpose. Ten thousand wasps would sting the desert lion to death.

Not if I can help it.

David was one against hundreds of fighters, but the Ripclaw ATV was a hell of a flyswatter. He was going to light them up. Then the Israeli guards

along the wall above had to see them.

David selected incendiary and cluster munitions. He set the crosshairs in the middle of the cool blobs. Before shooting, he had to confirm the targets were hostile. There was a quick way.

“Miss Aleph, ready loudspeakers and exterior lights. Play ‘Anu Nihiyeh HaRishonim’ as loud as you can.”

If they were the enemy, the patriotic song “We Will Be The First Pioneers” would prompt them to shoot at him. David congratulated himself—it was a pretty efficient way to sort friend from foe.

“Dave, we’re being painted by radar. It’s coming from the Israeli Air Force plane.”

Crap!

Their attempt to reach the base with the Harris radio might have looked like a jamming attempt. High levels of RF energy were always suspicious and targeted automatically by aircraft and drones. Of course, a human normally decided when to pull the trigger. Normally.

“The fighter jet is coming in for a closer look.”

“Did you broadcast our friendly transponder?”

“IAF systems are known to be paranoid.”

David had a chilling thought. “Miss Aleph, this ATV’s friend-foe codes, have they been updated?”

“Not since its last maintenance six months ago.”

He’d been in too much of a hurry to leave Fort Jericho. The aircraft could not see the hostile force sneaking along the wall. They only saw him in a stolen Ripclaw ATV preparing to fire on the border wall to punch a hole in it and kill some Israeli soldiers in the guard tower.

“Broadcast my personal codes.”

“The plane isn’t listening to me, it just keeps repeating لقد تم تحذيرك in Arabic. That means—”

“You have been warned.”

David cut power to the gun turret and faced the ATV in a neutral direction.

“Detecting missile launch.”

The frequency and pitch of the dashboard alarm increased.

“It’s a Popeye air-to-surface warhead. Launching countermeasures.”

Miss Aleph flipped out.

“Dave! Get me out of here!”

David grabbed her from the seat and kicked open the gullwing door. He ran to the side of the road and put his head down in the gravel of the ditch, covering his ears and jamming his eyes tight. He flexed his arms crosswise alongside his head and pushed out as much of his breath as he could from his lungs.

He was glad, so very glad, of the dusty divot of a foxhole he had been lucky enough to find. The incoming Popeye missile’s rocket propulsion sounded like a tornado roaring toward them through a tunnel. Its wail drowned out the alarms coming from the Ripclaw.

David opened his mouth and took short breaths, shallow in, completely out, shallow in, completely out.

39

THE FORMER IRAQ

ELLIE

It was so horrifying that Ellie could not look away.

The second prisoner from the truck, bound hand and foot, rolled over to the other prisoner and bit his throat. Captain Atticus and Sarge Bryan pulled the frothing, snarling fellow off.

“Damn!” Nobu said, grabbing the man’s convulsing feet.

Mr. Perdix, who had administered the truth drug to the first prisoner, was staring at his subject with concern. The neck wound did not look so deep, but the bitten prisoner started to thrash and go into convulsions. Seconds later, both their prisoners were still, two pairs of red hemorrhaging eyes staring up.

“Dead,” Nobu said.

“Impossible,” Atticus protested.

Ellie forced herself to look. “The fellow barely scratched him before you pulled him off. How could he have...”

“It was poison,” Mr. Perdix said. He had gloved fingers deep inside the assailant’s mouth. “This one had a fake button on his collar. He cracked it and then bit the other fellow using his teeth to break the skin and inject the toxin. It has acted like powerful scorpion venom.”

There was a camouflage canopy draped all around the dead men’s truck. Ellie took Marwood the monkey outside. She had to get some air.

Nobu's radio crackled. Ellie felt a surge of relief, and it took her a minute to figure out why.

These wide-open grassy hills, so idyllic if one saw them on a postcard, were actually stifling. They gave her a claustrophobic sense of dread and impending harm. In this bucolic setting, people were gleefully slaughtering each other for reasons she would never completely understand. The shallow graves, where bodies of young and old alike had been liquefied, and now this murder-suicide out of the blue. It all rattled her more than she wanted to admit.

"You're fading out, Mockingbird," the voice on the radio said. *"Boost your gain."*

"I'm at max," Nobu protested. "This is a microwave uplink. It should be clear as a bell."

"We're having—aahrk—some issues. Stand by."

Atticus grabbed the mic.

"This is Mockingbird actual. We need diplomatic civilian exfil ASAP. Ground or air, just make it quick."

Ellie did not know much military speak, but "exfil" sounded quite timely and welcome.

"We have your coordinates... Mockingbird, how did you end up in Iraq?"

"Long story. So where do you want us? Be advised: We observed concealed surface-to-air batteries all through the Turkish hills. Only a top-level stealth bird will get in and out safely."

"Just... old position... reports of skirmishes... Turkish Kurdistan border. PKK taking advantage... massive insurgency."

Even Ellie could tell that meant there was no going back the way they had come.

"I'm not taking my transport all the way to Baghdad!" Atticus cursed. "A trillion dollars a year budget, and DoD is telling me to thumb a ride? Pathetic."

“Southeast from your position not safe... food riots in Ramadi. Sunni versus Shi’a rioting and massacres... Iranian tanks assembling along the—”

“Skytower?” Nobu pounded the delicate-looking equipment with his fist. “This is Mockingbird, come in.”

He finally threw the microphone against the side of the MULE. “I’ve lost the signal again. What’s up with comms around here?”

Atticus put a hand on Nobu’s shoulder to steady him.

“Don’t worry,” Atticus said. “They’re useless Navy swabbies in Doha. We’re Green Berets. We conquered Afghanistan with twelve guys on horseback. We can get one civilian home safely.”

Ellie was getting the hang of this military machismo. Sitting still was never the preferred option. The dead pair had been repairing the truck with spare parts that had been sent by a long-distance delivery drone.

“You think we could signal the Worldwide Help people who sent the drone?” Ellie asked. “They might have some compound or relief center we could wait at.”

“Good idea,” Atticus said thoughtfully. “But I don’t like dealing with unknowns. We can’t be sure who sent the spare-parts drone. If we see an established WWHI relief center, we’ll think about it. Wherever we go, they’ll be glad to get our cargo of medicine and food.”

Ellie opened her filthy, torn handbag to check she had her passport. Everything fell on the grass. Sarge Bryan stooped down immediately to help her collect her stuff. His chalk-white albino hands were large and scarred.

“What’s with the ‘Mockingbird’?”

Bryan smiled. It was a strangely human expression given his pale features and blue irises, which seemed to float a half inch above his cybernetic eyes.

“That’s from the book, *Kill a Mockingbird*, y’know?”

“I know. Doesn’t it have a character named Atticus?”

Sarge Bryan nodded. “The captain’s parents were fans.”

Ellie brushed dry grass off her billfold.

“Oh!” Why hadn’t she thought of this before? She dashed over to the commander, followed by a bemused Bryan.

Nobu and Singh were inspecting the engine of the large eighteen-wheeled relief convoy truck. Atticus was looking at a map. She held out her surprise.

“It’s a credit card,” Atticus said.

“That’s what the kidnappers thought. We spies have our secrets. It’s a phone.”

Mr. Perdix had been pouting since his truth-serum victim was poisoned. He took a look.

“For once, the reporter is right. This is a Lichtwerks neutrino transceiver.”

“Huh?”

“It’s still experimental.” The pale scientist held the piece of laminated plastic up gently. “I’m surprised you’ve got one.”

“They sent it to the Lifestyles desk at my newspaper. I guess they want to make it hip for young people to use, which I never figured out how to do since I can’t recall that it came with any instructions.”

“What does it do?” Corporal Singh asked.

Mr. Perdix prattled on about peer-to-peer phone systems using neutrinos and a switching hub inside a supercollider array.

Bo-ring.

“If the military’s best sat-comm is down, why would this work?” Nobu asked.

“Neutrinos can pass through a light-year of solid lead,” Mr. Perdix said. “The modulated signals will go through the Earth, not around it.”

The DARPA man’s fingernail tapped a panel on the device. It started glowing.

“There.”

The single button morphed into a keypad with numbers and other symbols Ellie did not recognize.

“Right, then,” Mr. Perdix said. “Anyone want to phone home?”

...

Ellie's *Citizen Juggernaut* editor Smitty Heath was gobsmacked.

"You're alive? How did you manage that?" His picture in the video link was tiny but clear.

"As Mark Twain said: Reports of my death are greatly exaggerated." Ellie was just trying to rid herself of images of the poisoned men writhing and thrashing on the ground. Despite being sore all over and terrified every minute, she wanted to appear as nonchalant as possible. "You can cancel the want ad for a new reporter."

The gobsmacking continued for Smitty when she told him she was in the disintegrating country of Iraq. He nearly fell off his big rubber back-pain therapy ball.

"But how? Why?"

"Well, Kurdistan's old news, isn't it?" Ellie said, checking there were no dead bodies in frame behind her. "I decided to go where the headlines are hitting the fan."

He stuck his face closer to his monitor with the air of a Tarantino film villain.

"You're not doing anything unseemly that would bring the *Juggernaut* into disrepute, are you?"

Before ringing off, Smitty promised to get in touch with Mr. Sewart from the Foreign Office. That smarmy fellow was the one who had bounced her into her secret mission to infiltrate poor Mr. Borkin's factory. Sewart was probably sitting in a comfy chair in Boodle's men's club, complaining about too much ice in his drink.

Corporal Singh came out from underneath the big truck, wiping grime off his hands. "The Worldwide Help vehicle is in tip-top shape."

"All right," Atticus said in a sharp drill leader's voice, which Ellie found more invigorating than a double shot of espresso. "There's no helo coming, and folks are fighting to the north and east. I don't like the idea of waiting

here.”

The area was clearly rife with unsavory characters.

“We go south. We’ll try to hook up with allies or a reliable NGO. We’re out of here in five minutes.”

Ellie was miffed. Normally she could zero in on what was peeving her in an instant. As the men dispersed, it took a few moments for her fatigue, soreness, and dehydration to yield to clarity.

“Sarge Bryan,” she said sharply to the only fellow close by. “What do you mean by coming on a rescue mission with absolutely no idea how to accomplish ‘exfil’? I’m sure when the British SAS plan something, ‘exfil’ is foremost on their agenda.”

Bryan’s albino features looked pained, and he shuffled his combat boots.

“We kinda went on mission out of Ankara in a hurry, y’see.”

“Still,” Ellie continued, despite instantly feeling bad about hen-pecking her rescuer. “If Mr. Borkin had been injured... I mean, he *was* injured, and then he was blown to pieces. The point is, if he or any one of us had to be carried, it would have put us in a very bad spot.”

Bryan checked the commander was out of earshot.

“Y’see, ma’am, there wasn’t supposed to be a mission at all. Your guy from the English embassy said they’d handle everything. We knew the Brits were not gonna do squat.”

Ellie divined “squat” meant bugger all. That nasty sneaky Mr. Sewart from the Foreign Office. They would just have left her with PKK 301. *Buggerfutz!*

“So how did you manage it? Coming after us?”

“As soon as the PKK grabbed you, it became a domestic Turkish terrorist thing. We were told to back off,” Bryan said. His eyes scanned over her and then swept the horizon. “Cap Atticus wasn’t having it. He set off against orders and without support. He said: ‘We put Ms. Sato in danger, and we’re getting her out.’”

“I’m grateful, of course.” Now she felt like an absolute heel. “I trust the

captain won't get in trouble?"

"Maybe a demotion, a few years in jail, a week of waterboarding."

Oh no!

Bryan's grin flashed, and she knew she'd been had.

"You nearly had me there, you big scallywag."

"Say, Ms. Sato," Sarge Bryan said. "I've got a hunch. Could I use that Lux/Net thing to make a call?"

"Sure. If they charge me for extra minutes, I'll send the bill to Whitehall."

His big fingers delicately tapped the tiny keypad.

"Dr. Rafiq?"

The blank holograph pixelated and turned into the upside-down image of a teenage girl. She had masses of curly brown hair and huge intense eyes.

"Uncle Bryan!"

"I guess that's not your Army's top linguistics expert?" Ellie guessed.

"Hey, Sienna," Sarge Bryan said. "Is the professor around? Indo-Iranian languages are his specialty, and I'd like to ask him something."

"He's not here. Sick."

"What are you doing in the classroom?"

"Self-study for extra credit."

"You're not trying to get a peek at final exams, are you?" Sarge said with mock suspiciousness. This Sienna girl must be quite a character, Ellie concluded. "Cheaters never prosper."

"Cept in politics, business, and sports."

"She has you there, Sarge."

"This is Ellie Sato," Sarge said, introducing her.

"I know you from online," Sienna chirped brightly. "You started the square-hoop earring trend in Europe. You look much nicer than your online picture."

"Pleased to meet you, Sienna..."

"McKnight."

“We’re calling on this nice lady’s dime from... a different time zone.”

“The caller ID just says Europe. You’re probably in Germany, right? Ramstein Airbase beer fest.” Sienna put her mouth close to her mic. “Sarge, are you on a date?”

“It’s so not like that,” the albino soldier protested. “I’m just borrowing her phone, and it’s on speaker.”

“He’s a really nice guy,” Sienna blurted. “As an E-5 non-commissioned officer, he has job security, a good health plan, and how many people do you know who can see through brick walls?”

“Sienna...”

“The more time you spend with him, he grows on you. Not like fungus, in a good way.”

“Listen,” Bryan said, looking hopeful about changing the subject. “If you have Dr. Rafiq’s translation software there, can you run something through it?”

Sarge played the recording of what the prisoner had said under chemical inducement. He left out the biting and death gurgling.

“Wow, that does not sound like a happy camper.”

“He’s chill now.”

“*Grikurt Yeniden doğmak...* I don’t think it’s a curse word... Let me try some spellings,” Sienna McKnight said. The studious teenager was determined to get to the bottom of what she thought was a harmless trivia puzzle, not the last words of some murderous hijacker.

“There we go. It’s not a Turkish curse word. It’s a political group, the ‘Grey Wolves’ and the verb ‘reborn.’” Sienna looked on her other screen. “Grey Wolves are an ultranationalist militia with more than three hundred thousand hard-core members, several million sympathizers, and wealthy backers. Its paramilitary wing is a larger force than most armies.”

Sienna squinted at the screen.

“Anything else out there about them?”

“They have some really nasty things they do to their enemies. Responsible for thousands of deaths, mostly in mass killings such as the Maraş massacre and the Taksim Square massacre. Linked to many political and religious slayings, most notably the attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II in 1981.”

Sienna nodded, her hair again covering her eyes. She read from her online reference.

“They claim historical legitimacy by saying they are the modern descendants of the Janissaries, the Ottoman Empire elite guard. In 1826, the Janissaries were disbanded, and six thousand of them were put to death by decapitation in a castle prison known as the Tower of Blood.”

“I think that’s enough history,” Bryan said. “Say hi to your mom for me.”

“Will do,” Sienna said with cheerful enthusiasm. “Bring me back something, a beer mug or lederhosen.”

“If I see something appropriate I will, bye.”

“And Ms. Sato, I’m on the school paper. Maybe we could do an interview sometime on what’s next in Paris fashion?”

“Text me.”

“Oh, and have fun, you two. My uncle’s a keeper.”

“I don’t plan on letting him out of my sight for a while.”

The crystal-clear image cut out. The real world seemed dingy by comparison.

“Your niece is quite a handful, I’d say.”

“My people are in Africa, but I grew up in North Carolina. Been friends with the McKnights for forever. I was there when they adopted Sienna, who had just been born in Afghanistan.”

“So the McKnights are in the military?”

“Dr. McKnight and her wife, yes, ma’am. The doctor was killed by an IED while trying to help earthquake victims,” Sarge said. “She was the first one to suggest I might need cybernetic implants one day. Though back then, the

technology was totally theoretical, and there was no way Uncle Sam would pay for them.”

“So,” Ellie said, with habitual inquisitiveness, “how did you finally upgrade?”

Sarge’s eyes were two unblinking blue LED lights, which looked much more strange set in his completely startling but totally human face. “Well, Ms. Sato, that’s a very interesting topic. One for another day.”

The truck’s engines started. Atticus stretched out his hand and helped her into the cab. Exfil could not come soon enough.

40

RIVER JORDAN EAST OF JERICHO GARRISON

TEMIR

The Israelis waited too long to blow up the bridge. That was their doom.

Temir had studied their fortifications. From the fallen city of Amman, he had sent out observation drones. Those were shot down by IDF lasers and snipers but not before revealing the trenches their D-9 A.M.red bulldozers were digging in front of the main Jericho gates.

The Israeli soldiers moved without urgency. Intuition and a lifetime of studying battle tactics with the Grey Wolves showed him their weakness: they never really believed they were going to be attacked.

Maybe the commander at Jericho had been wary of sending troops over the border into Jordan. Maybe he had been ordered not to. Maybe he was waiting for air support rather than risking a sapper team or launching missiles. Perhaps he did not want to fire on a Worldwide Help convoy.

As the last of their heavy trucks had traversed the steel arch spanning the Jordan River, Temir signaled for convergence and assault. Infiltration teams had entered Israel through massive drainpipes that pumped water into the evaporating Dead Sea. The infiltrators had signaled to him from atop the border wall. They were in position. The assault on Israel's strongest point along the Jordanian border began.

Once fate gives you the initiative, he learned, never give it up.

“Eylül,” Temir said, dismounting from the truck. “Don’t wait to draw them out. Take the lions of Zion in their den!”

Temir paused by a catapult siege mortar. It was a crude device, hammered together by Palestinian militants in Jordan. It could throw a small warhead about four hundred meters. Normal ordnance would just bounce off the reinforced concrete of the border wall. They were not launching ordinary bombs.

“Rolling thunder, now!”

For every ten thermobaric devices they hurled, three would detonate as planned, four would go off within six or seven minutes, and the others were to be given a wide berth. They might explode an hour later with the force of ten tons of TNT or not at all. Another good reason to keep his forces dispersed.

Temir flinched at an unexpected detonation. He felt a blast of heat from three football fields away. One of the siege engine catapults had exploded. Even before the smoke cleared, another squad came up to the edge of the fiery crater to fill the gap.

In front of them was a much more glorious sight: the walls of Jericho, its disintegrating concrete, its contorted steel, burning brightly on the new night’s horizon.

Attacked from front and behind, unable to engage a dispersed and converging enemy, Jericho had fallen. After the walls were down, they mopped up the shattered defenders.

Temir rode a motorcycle a thousand yards away from the blasted border wall. Scattered gunfire sounded like the crackle of wood in a distant campfire. Temir found his second-in-command.

“When I go up there, if I find any Israelis alive, the commander of that section will have his feet and hands cut off.”

“Yes, Aga Temir,” Eylül said.

“See what small vehicles are still working. I am going to visit the river.”

The others behind Eylül also heard. They could not hurry away fast enough to bayonet dead bodies. Good. Temir needed to do something they would not understand.

Islamic tradition held that the Dead Sea was a place of wickedness. It had been the site of the ancient, sinful city of Sodom. The Jordan River was cursed. Temir needed to bathe there. His symbiont urged him to draw into him and it the invisibly flowing pure evil. He was too much in the creature’s thrall to resist.

In the river’s channel, there was only filthy mud and sewage. He had brought his own water for ablution.

He stripped naked and doused his changed body. The symbiont covered his torso from neck to groin. It rippled, tasting the cool air with its translucent flesh. If they saw this, would his followers call him demon or jinn? Would they try to behead him or immolate him, or would they worship him?

Water coursed in rivulets over his silent partner. Larger now, its dark ichor-filled veins were engorged. Temir could feel its crystal tines biting into the tense muscles along his spine. It wanted to devour him, slowly. It already had.

He climbed back up on the Israeli side. The wall was broken in two dozen places, the steel and concrete tottered on the horizon jagged and splintered like the ruined, broken teeth of a speechless mouth. The gateway to Israel was incapable of uttering the meekest protest as the steel-toed boot of the Grey Wolves rammed through a final time.

A jet screamed overhead. It circled but dropped nothing. *Again, they hesitate.* Technology had made the sons of Canaan weak.

Temir started his motorcycle. He was as anxious to see the bodies of the dead defenders. When he got to the baked and smoldering section of the main border gate, one of his best technicians approached. His face was downcast.

“Aga Temir, sir, I cannot operate the Israeli surface-to-air missile systems.

It simply won't function without the local AI, which killed itself before we could capture it."

"No matter. We've brought our own flyswatters."

The jet returned, not alone. Temir watched from underneath the shattered border observation tower. They would come in fast and low. Popeye missiles with functioning guidance had a range up to two hundred miles. With their automatic targeting systems offline or unreliable, the Israeli pilots would have no choice but to avoid the Jordanian SAMs and come in close from the direction of Jericho.

Jet engines roared overhead. Air brakes whined as the F-35s' speed broke below sonic. They came in a very impressive and disciplined cyclone formation. A column of tanks or any conventional army would have faced airborne annihilation.

"They're close enough," Temir muttered. "Shoot!"

The planes shot first. The first Israeli air-to-surface missile fired vaporized the lead truck. That motivated Temir's people inside the others. They launched eighty Grom surface-to-air missiles nearly all at once. Half of them had conventional warheads, the others were tipped with thorium overpressure bomblets. They raced up to greet the Israeli jets.

The last ones fired were the first to explode. The shockwave propelled the others at three hundred meters per second. The same speed the incoming jets were traveling.

Then the second wave went off. And the third, the fourth, and the fifth. Temir lowered his binoculars to take in the whole glorious sight.

"Not like bombing civilians in Gaza, is it!" Eylül yelled up at them.

Several IAF planes disintegrated straight off, caught in the hot expanse of fusion gases. Several more were hit by shockwaves. Their engines shut down. Flying too low to reignite their jets, they hit hard-packed earth and crashed in flaming smears.

The skies cleared. The remaining trucks advanced into the Jericho

compound. Temir found Eylül and the computer technician organizing the working vehicles they had found.

“Ha!” the young man exulted. “The Jewish pigs are flying off with their tails between their legs.”

Temir slapped him. The boy thumped onto the ground, holding his face. He was besotted with the easy victory.

“Why not just stab old women and children to death in their kitchens?” Temir’s words lashed him further. “The greater the enemy, the greater *our* glory. Underestimate them again, and I’ll bury you alive with their corpses.”

He kicked a charred Israeli body. The dried-out head came off the spine with a puff of ash.

“These are heroes. These are trophies. These are... everything!”

Temir grabbed an air horn. He gave three quick blasts. It was the signal to dismount from the convoy.

“Enemy ground forces will launch artillery. We have to be away from Jericho in ten minutes.”

“B-but their radios,” the young technician sputtered through the blood and dirt caking his swelling lips. “They can’t call in our positions. How will they attack again?”

This one was a Grey Wolves member from a Turkish cell. Though young, he should know better.

“Even if one of the Israeli pilots has to eject and take the message down personally, he’ll alert a surface-to-surface missile battery. They will destroy their own garrison. It’s what I would do.”

Eleven minutes later, the first salvo of Israeli MLRS missiles rained down. The devastating warheads bounced the rubble of Fort Jericho. They battered the broken redoubt and the dead guarding it. Temir’s main force was already well down the road, driving in dispersed formation deep into the Palestinian West Bank. The white WWHI trucks were going in an entirely different direction.

Self-driving software in the trucks would take them to the nearest Israeli towns, where they would explode. The robot-driven car bombs would be decoys for any returning jets and helicopters.

Temir's main force was on motorcycles and in jeeps, civilian cars, and trucks. Every transport formerly belonging to the local Arabs in Jericho had been commandeered.

The technician slowed his two-seater electric car, coming up beside him.

"Aga Temir," he said through swollen lips. "I'm sorry for my foolish exuberance."

"Remember the lesson, and you may yet live to enjoy the day of ultimate victory. What word of the battlefronts?"

"Combining reports from locals and what I was able to scrape from the Israeli Army data network, the country is on fire. The Arabs in Nazareth, Galilee, Nablus, Bethlehem, and especially Hebron, have risen against their occupiers. Hundreds of thousands have joined with us."

The younger man unfurled a scroll view screen stolen from the IDF compound.

"Even Tel Aviv is shut down. One old Palestinian man here told me he sent six sons to Jerusalem to fight and, Inshallah, to be martyred driving the Jews from Haram el-Sharif."

The Noble Sanctuary, the Temple Mount. The name of the place sent shudders through their bodies, Temir's and the symbiont's.

"What of Gaza?"

The technician's face turned downcast. "There has been no breakthrough." Maybe he was afraid bad news would earn him another beating. "The two million allies inside the iron ring of the siege have not broken free through the Israeli lines."

Temir did not expect them to. The Gaza Strip had been occupied since 1967. Inhabitants had lived under the Hebrews' gun lash for all those years. They were two million prisoners concentrated inside the largest open-air

prison camp in the world.

Gazans were forced to dig tunnels to get food and medicine. They were sickened and humiliated, left to drink the sewage and effluent from toilets of the bordering Israeli towns. Disarmed and demoralized, Temir had not expected them to overcome the formidable border barriers on their own.

“GO!” Temir’s voice, given strength by the symbiont’s muscles across his diaphragm, carried like a loudspeaker.

The roar of his men’s approval was only drowned out by a distant explosion among the ruins of Fort Jericho. Explosions of what? Temir did not care; it lay behind him.

41

THE FORMER IRAQ

ELLIE

The big relief truck began moving before Ellie realized the ignition had switched on. It was as quiet and smooth running as a Rolls Royce. Marwood the monkey clung to the dashboard. Somewhere in his little tote bag, he'd found his green sun visor. He looked down the road ahead of them.

"This thing has lidar self-navigation," Nobu said, taking the driver's seat of the Worldwide Help vehicle.

"Stay close to the Syrian border," Atticus said. "We don't want to get caught between any Sunni and Shi'a militias."

"When their blood is up," Corporal Singh said, "they are known for taking body parts, not prisoners."

Everyone's bloody blood is up around here, Ellie thought. She was relieved to be out of Turkey and traveling in a sound vehicle, not walking behind robotic pack animals.

"Fortunately," Atticus said, "the US taxpayer has spent billions of dollars to build the Jordanians a very nice airfield. They allow us to use it once in a while."

Atticus held a folding screen and pulled the map image over with his finger. "H-4 Air Base is located along the main road to the capital city, Amman."

Sarge looked over his leader's shoulder. His pale lips made a smacking sound. Ellie was getting better at interpreting nonverbal man noises. This was friendly skepticism.

"What, Sarge?" Nobu said. "Would you rather drive through downtown Mosul? Kids' lunchboxes come with RPGs next to their juice boxes."

Corporal Singh took offense. "That is the habit of stereotyping that gives a region a bad name."

"The local politicians in Baghdad broke the country, stole everything that wasn't nailed down, and kicked us out," Sarge said. "That's what gives this place a bad name."

"Jordan it is," Nobu said. "Computer says seven hours. I bet we can make it in five."

"Don't get caught going too fast," Ellie cautioned. "I'd hate to find out what their speeding penalties are."

...

Ellie jerked awake. *What a ghastly nightmare.*

She had dozed off without realizing it. In her dream, she had been sitting atop a steam engine shaped like the Tower of London that rolled along on huge steel wheels decorated with shrunken heads. She really did not want to find out what lay at the end of the line.

She awoke to find herself covered by a purple WWHI blanket. It was a mostly acrylic cloth but might have some cotton woven in. Ellie imagined Atticus had draped it on her sleeping form. He was a real gentleman, of the trained-killer sort.

In front of her were the huge tinted windows of the WWHI relief truck. All the grassy hills and trees had vanished. The landscape was scraped bare. They were on a highway called Iraq Route 20. It looked like a road inside a strip mine.

Nobu was dozing in the driver's seat. The monkey had spread-eagled himself across the steering wheel. The truck's mechBrain was driving.

“Just keep to the center lane, all right, Marwood?” Ellie said, getting up. She had to pee badly.

Fortunately, complete washroom facilities were in the back of the shipping-container-sized box the truck was pulling. She came out and found the men messing around.

“Told you that was hollow,” Sarge Bryan said.

“I’ll never doubt”—Atticus grunted as he pried at an interior side paneling with a crowbar—“your x-ray vision again.”

A swatch of plastic came off the side of the rear compartment wall. Inside were coconut-sized pockets that reminded her of an egg carton. They were empty.

“What do you think?” Nobu said. “Space for additional armor for the sides of the truck?”

“Worldwide Help operates in the roughest parts of the globe,” Sarge said. “They’re known to use paramilitary force to protect their clinics and schools.”

“What about the other side?”

That secret compartment was not empty.

“Drones.”

“They look like they’re pregnant,” Ellie said. It was the only way to describe the bulbous midsection.

“I know these from India. The big one is a carrier for a microSwarm,” Singh said. “They can be used for pollenating fields where pollution has killed off bees or even inoculating populations in remote villages if there’s no other way to stop disease from spreading.”

Atticus examined the toaster-sized devices.

“Why hide them?”

“They’re probably worth more than the truck and everything in it,” Mr. Perdix said. “They can be militarized to serve up chemical or biological weapons. We’ve experimented with them at DARPA. One stung me by

accident; I still have the mark right on my collarbone.”

Mr. Perdix pulled his shirt down and searched for his battle scar.

“Aaachiie!” Marwood freaked out up front.

The truck slowed. Ellie and the men looked.

In capuchin language, he must have meant to say “roadblock ahead.” There were high embankments on either side of them. There was no way to turn the big vehicle around. Ellie ducked down. It was much too soon to be shot at again.

“What do we do?”

“Don’t panic,” Atticus said, concern rising in his voice. “Nobu, take control. Don’t slow down too fast, either. They’ll think we’re standing off and might start shooting. They can attack from either side of these berms along the road.”

Straight across their path was a burned-out fuel tanker flanked by some oil drums piled with rocks and dirt. Ragged bandit types were standing behind other cover along the highway.

“Ms. Sato, would you mind hiding?”

“Would the loo be appropriate?”

“Best place for a diplomat.”

“What about you all? If they board and find me, what’s our cover story?”

“We have an attractive young female, a load of moisturizing lotion, and a monkey,” Atticus said wryly. “We’ll think of something.”

Ellie hid. During her few minutes alone, Ellie considered the sad possibility of again falling into enemy hands. She also considered the much brighter prospects. Atticus had referred to her as “attractive.”

Hardly a minute passed, and the door opened. They had not even slowed down.

“What happened?”

“At the very least, I was expecting a polite shakedown,” Sarge Bryan said.

“They seemed to be quite wary of us,” Corporal Singh said. “They moved

the barriers and stood well back as soon as they saw the WWHI insignia.”

...

Their relief at nearing the Iraq-Jordan border was tainted by a blotch on the evening horizon. A literal one.

“Damn, I hope that’s just a massive oil refinery that blew up!” Nobu said. He took the wheel and drove the truck onto the shoulder of the road.

“Does Jordan have oil?” Ellie asked drowsily.

Ellie hung on to a strap dangling from the roof of the cab and ducked down to look out the window.

They were still on Iraq’s highway Route 20, just ahead it branched left to the Jordanian border. A column of black smoke rose up what Ellie guessed must be kilometers high. After the bandits had let them pass without a word, they had not seen anyone for miles. Once, they had to stop for a slow-moving line of skinny sheep. Atticus had his people offload some of the grain and rice. Mr. Perdix made the old shepherd sign a receipt for the gift.

Now the horizon was on fire. Ellie first assumed it was one of Iraq’s oil facilities. However, the smoke was coming from the wrong side of the border.

“Sarge?” Atticus prompted his scout.

The large albino man blinked, zooming in with giga-pixel resolution.

“Can’t tell much except it’s been burning for hours.”

As they got closer, the black cloud mushroomed out into a canopy. They approached the border. A hundred meters of jagged concrete barricades guided them to the Iraq-Jordan checkpoint.

“No one there,” Corporal Singh said.

“Ah, if this map and my triangulation is correct,” Sarge said, “we may have an issue.”

It was nearly certain the plume of smoke was originating from the airfield they were trying to get to.

“Steady on,” Atticus said, visibly disappointed. “Let’s just see what’s

what.”

A long line of empty cars stretched for kilometers on both sides of the border-crossing buildings.

“There are people,” Sarge said, searching the landscape. “They’re hiding. Something came through here. The civilians left their cars and ran.”

The concrete arches over the border were cracked. Ruins of reinforced concrete were scored down to bones of rusted steel. A bilingual sign hung by its last screw. Ellie tilted her head to read it.

بوابة السلام والازدهار

The Gate of Peace and Prosperity

“Can we get through?” Ellie asked, really not wanting to have to resort to another MULE train trudge.

“We’re Green Beret,” Atticus said. “Getting through is what we do.”

“What could have done this?”

“An air attack?” Nobu said. “Syrians?”

Mr. Perdix shook his head with a blank stare of puzzlement.

“Not likely,” he said. “There are blast points, but no craters, which would be normal from air-dropped munitions. Cluster munitions... kinetic penetrators... No. It’s all wrong, they wouldn’t do that to reinforced concrete. The structures look like they were swatted sideways. Even the sunken foundations have been ripped out.”

There was no way through.

“Keep watch,” Atticus snapped. “We need a new onramp.”

Ellie guessed this effort would involve blowing things up. The captain and Nobu gathered supplies from the MULEs. A cluster of wrecked vehicles sat close by. She thought she saw something moving.

Without thinking, Ellie jumped out of the truck. Sarge Bryan caught her arm before she got too close. It was a white Toyota pickup, squashed flat as a pancake. A withered, desiccated small, oh so small, hand had dropped a toy

to the asphalt.

“Ms. Sato,” Sarge said evenly, “you can’t help them. They’ve been dead for hours.”

Ellie went back and sat in the passenger seat. She neither looked nor flinched when her companions blew up a series of demolition charges. The concrete barriers flew to pieces. Their path was clear.

“How do you figure this?” Nobu asked once they were on their way. “Jordan has been peaceful for decades. They have treaties with America and Israel.”

“Looks like someone doesn’t care,” Atticus said. “The airbase is toast. We have to go to Amman, find the US embassy, and hole up until there are normal flights again.”

“I want a gun.” She was mildly surprised to hear herself say that. It sounded quite right, given her immediate grasp of things.

So, she said it again. “Captain Atticus, I want a gun. I’m afraid a small one just won’t do. I want a large gun to be issued to me at your earliest convenience.”

“Well, Ms. Sato...” Mr. Perdix began.

“Makes sense,” Atticus said, cutting across the other man’s dithering. “Corporal Singh, hook her up with a helmet, a ballistic vest, and...” He looked her up and down. “An XM25 compact. Much easier to aim than a handgun and has auto-target selection.”

Instructions as to how to kill someone with the scary but stylish-looking rifle took less than three minutes. There was a view screen on the surprisingly light assault weapon. It fired a variety of exploding shotgun-type shells. In auto-select mode, the XM25’s small mechBrain would lock on to the nearest “threat target” outlined in red. To select another red or yellow painted target, one toggled the thumb switch. Biometrics of friendlies, Atticus, Sarge Bryan, and everyone were registered in its memory. They would be painted green, and one would have to hit an “override button” to kill them.

“No shooting friendlies, okay?”

“Thank you, Captain.”

Half an hour later, a velvety dusk had crept up at the horizon. The black geyser of smoke was fading into the distance.

“Oh, look,” she said, pointing out the side window. “The first stars of the evening.”

“Crap!” Mr. Perdix yelled.

“Those aren’t stars,” Nobu said, grabbing the wheel. “They’re UAV drones, headed our way.”

“If they launch sub munitions, we’re sitting ducks.”

“Is there anything I can do?” Ellie asked. The distant fireflies assembled into a line in front of them.

“We should get out and take cover.”

“Sir!” Nobu said, confused. “This ride is not stopping.”

“Kill the autodrive.”

“Can’t.”

“Let me see.” Mr. Perdix pushed Nobu aside. Very unscientifically, he pounded his fist on the computerized dashboard.

The truck was refusing to slow. It sped up, heading toward the ominous dots in the sky. A series of flashes came from the drones.

“They’re launching!”

Atticus yanked her arm and pulled her into the back of the speeding truck. Missiles sped toward them from all sides.

42

NEAR THE ISRAEL/JORDAN BORDER WALL JUDEA & SAMARIA

DAVID

Assuming you weren't cooked alive by heat or ripped into sushi-sized pieces by shrapnel, the next thing that would kill you inside an explosion radius was blast overpressure. Hyper-accelerated shock waves traveled at supersonic speeds and were perfect for rupturing lungs, kidneys, and bowels. The majority of victims in a typical suicide bombing died from internal bleeding in the lungs.

Above David, the buzz-bomb whine of the Popeye air-to-surface missile cut out. A roar engulfed everything. The ground underneath him convulsed, making him weightless for an instant.

David covered his nose and mouth. Dust and small stones rained down from the night sky. His lungs would not inflate. He knew the more he tried, the more his diaphragm would seize up. If he panicked, his own body would suffocate him.

He dared not open his eyes yet.

He had to relax. Be calm. An image came randomly. Was it from a magazine? A webpage of vacation spots? It was of a craggy volcanic cliff. On that cliff perched a building with golden spires surrounding a figure of the Buddha. Behind the spires was what at first looked like an inverted cloud, but

he realized it was actually the cone of an enormous volcano stretching across the whole horizon.

Time passed. He had an awareness of it passing in the conscious world. But the vision of the temple on the jagged peak and the volcano held his mind entranced in timeless wonder.

David became aware of his breathing, then his coughing and retching.

He remembered where he was. The insurgents, the Israeli jet. It had fired the Popeye at him. The last thing he recalled before grabbing Miss Aleph's hand unit was the Ripclaw ATV firing off magnesium chaff and decoy drones to ward off the missile.

He wiped sweaty grit away and opened his eyes. It was getting light. Was that east? He was having trouble focusing. His legs were partly covered with dirt. When he moved he got a very disturbing sensation of shredded skin sloughing away like the crispy top layer of an overcooked chicken. He felt down, half expecting to encounter raw cartilage of his kneecap stripped bare by the blast. It was just his pants. Checking himself further, he found his underwear had forced itself into his butt crack so deeply he had to tear it to untangle his hips.

Next David jiggled his arms from side to side. He felt for wobbly bits along his spinal column. Visions of long days in rehab, embarrassing potty training, and rolling along the halls of Chaim Sheba Medical Center as a bitter crippled veteran faded. Everything had stayed on. It should not have. The torpedo-sized Popeye had a brutal kill radius.

His face was full of gravel. Rubbing it would cause more damage. He only poked at the pieces directly encrusting his eyelids.

He breathed in and choked. Not on blood in his lungs but from the smell of burning tires. It reminded him of his first duty assignment on the Gaza border. Rioters, just kids, had rolled the tires right toward his checkpoint. It smelled just like this—a filthy, oily, sulfurous smoke.

He struggled to his side to get a clean breath.

It was not dawn.

The light he saw was coming from the fuel cells and body of the ATV. The aluminum frame was on fire. Beyond that was a big crater. Either the countermeasures or the last-ditch self-driving decoy move had lured the Popeye far enough away.

He could breathe, stand. To do what? Surrender? The hundreds of insurgents making their way along the border wall under stealth cover must have seen the explosion.

He was expecting to be nose to nose with bayonets. He was alone. Even with the Ripclaw's thermal optics, he'd had a hard time seeing the enemy force. Now he had no clue what was around.

"Dave."

Miss Aleph had survived. Of course.

"Dave, if you're alive, dig me out of the blast debris."

43

JORDAN

ELLIE

Ellie gripped the sides of her seat. Their out-of-control self-driving truck was accelerating toward the incoming missiles.

The display on the dash flickered and changed shape.

“What’s that?”

The DARPA man looked. “It looks like multiband radar.”

“What is that?” Ellie repeated.

They were close enough to the hovering hostile drones that she could see small puffs of flame and white lines coming directly toward them.

From the roof of their big truck came *thump-pop* sounds. Jet trails went up and out from their truck, even faster than the ones coming at them.

“Interceptor missiles,” Nobu said, peering up.

“On a relief truck?” Atticus said.

“Those are Raytheon asymmetric kill interceptors,” Mr. Perdix said.

“Nothing else has those blue flames and moves that quickly.”

The Raytheon things did their job, mostly.

Flashes and smoke puffs dotted the sky like some kind of obscene fireworks display. The incoming missiles and the drones firing them spun to the ground in flames. Only one of the flying robot attackers survived. It dodged left and right, then came at them from the side.

“It’s not firing,” Atticus said.

“That drone is out of ammo,” Mr. Perdix observed.

“That’s good, right?” Ellie asked hopefully.

Atticus huffed air through his lips. This made his cheeks puff out in a manly “I’ve had enough of this” sort of way.

“It’s doing a suicide run at us broadside,” Mr. Perdix said. “It’s flying too low. Tracking radar won’t be able to get a lock.”

The right side of the truck exploded. The cab they were riding in rocked sideways. After shuddering and riding on only its right-side wheels, the rig slammed back down on the highway.

Ellie looked out the rear side window. Pieces of the last drone tumbled and convulsed in mechanical agony alongside them for a few meters, then collapsed, stretched up one broken rotor like it was giving them the finger, and tumbled into burning ruin.

Atticus studied the inside of the rear compartment.

“A ‘windbreaker’ system saved our ass,” Atticus concluded. “They have them on the most modern tanks. It shot the incoming drone down with a robot-controlled automatic shotgun.”

“What sort of truck did you say this is?”

After some more inspection, the men concluded that they had overlooked some features.

“It sort of makes sense,” Sarge Bryan said. “A main battle tank weights about seventy tons. This rig is nearly that heavy.”

“Everything in this machine is engineered for maximum defense and survivability,” Mr. Perdix said.

Atticus wanted human control of the steering wheel. “Nobu, make sure we can override the mechBrain autodriven.”

A few hundred yards later, they swerved around the smoldering remains of the other drones that had tried to ambush them. The truck thundered down the desolate Jordanian highway. On either side squat square buildings were

interspersed with patches of dry barren ground. Out of windows and doorways, occasional dim pairs of eyes glinted. Ellie could not tell if they belonged to frightened humans or wary animals.

“Finally,” Ellie exhaled. “The capital.”

المقبل خمس طرق عمان
(يرجى جملها أوراق السفر الخاصة بك جاهزة)

Next 5 Exits – Amman
(Please have your travel papers ready)

“Perhaps we should go to the British embassy,” she suggested. “I really need to freshen up.”

As they got farther inside the city Ellie’s momentary relief faded. Near the highest skyscrapers, the streets were quiet. The center of the city was dark. No one spoke. Maybe even Atticus and his men had wanted to think they had finally reached friendly ground.

In the middle of a big open roundabout the size of Piccadilly junction, an enormous racket came from all sides. Nobu swung on the wheel so hard Ellie thought they were going to tip over.

“Ambush!” their driver shouted. “RPG—”

The rest of his words were torn away by a sidelong impact that sent the back carriage skidding. The rear compartment of the truck had been cut in half. It skidded to a stop in the square. Their part, with the engine, continued in a shower of sparks.

People were shooting at them, hard! All Ellie wanted was for the spiderwebbed slab of glass that hung in front of her to survive a few more bullet impacts.

“Is the autodrive still working?”

“It better be,” Nobu retorted, holding up the disconnected steering wheel. “I sure ain’t steering!”

Mr. Perdix and Bryan appeared through the connector doorway from the

remains of the long container compartment.

“Thank goodness,” Ellie gasped to the two men. “I thought you’d been—”

“Ellie, head down!” Atticus yelled.

The windshield finally gave way. They swerved around a corner, tires screeching, the remaining rear of the truck on fire. Glass rained down on Ellie’s face and hands.

“Who’s shooting?” demanded Atticus.

“Looks like regular Jordanians.” Sarge snapped his head down under the broad dash console. “Disorganized and firing wild.”

Bullets raked the door beside Ellie. Plastic bits popped off and struck her.

Nobu had found a backup steering system. It looked like a gaming joystick.

“Go over by that building. It will give us hard cover on one side.”

“On it, Cap.”

No sooner had they edged the cab behind a solid-looking onramp than the world got very bright and hot. A horrid invisible bellows blasted hot, dry air down her windpipe, filling Ellie’s lungs to bursting, and then a giant fist slammed her in the sternum, collapsing her lungs so tightly she thought they’d never be able to inhale anything again.

The remains of the vehicle twisted and rocked like an immense toddler was shaking it to see what those squishy things inside were. One of those things started sliding out the torn-away back end of the truck.

Mr. Perdix’s eyes and mouth formed perfect circles as he soundlessly said, *Oh!*

Ellie grabbed his hand and got yanked along with him. *Hang on, you irritating twat.* She managed to keep the American scientist from being thrown out. She collapsed backward.

The worst pain was in her eardrums. It felt like two icepicks were going in from both sides. Ellie furiously worked her jaw to make it stop. She feared she had been struck deaf by whatever had blown up in the town square.

“Has the world gone mad?” Corporal Singh asked.

“No more than usual,” Mr. Perdix said drolly and studied his bare legs. They must have been hanging over the edge of the cab when the heat blast happened. Ellie’s stomach turned. Where his shoes and pants had burned away, fresh bleeding blisters were rising. Without much outward expression of pain or distress, he grabbed his injection gun from a pouch around his waist and shot red liquid into both his knees. Mr. Perdix then struggled to his feet.

Creepy git.

“If the capital is a war zone,” Ellie said, “no place in Jordan is safe.”

“Only one place to go, you agree, Bryan?” Atticus asked his second-in-command.

Sarge nodded. “Israel’s our best bet. IDF will have a handle on what’s going on.”

Loose hair whipped Ellie’s face, it smelled like foul smoke. Israel sounded like their last and final bet. The albino soldier blinked, probably checking the maps he had stored behind his cybernetic eyes.

Schreeeeeeee!

The tortured sound coming from the front tire was getting worse. Something metal had come loose from the fender or the wheel well and was scraping into the rubber tire. They could not stop.

“We gotta go for the Allenby Bridge and cross over the Jordan River. It leads directly to Fort Jericho. It’s a big garrison, we’ll be okay there.”

44

JERUSALEM

LIA

For a long time after they let the mysterious Worldwide Help ambulance pass, they encountered no one. From time to time, distant explosions rattled the windshield of the old Mercedes SUV. At an intersection, Lia saw another emergency vehicle. It sped toward them.

This one had ZAKA Search and Rescue markings. Orthodox Jewish volunteers operated them. They were known for taking up the task of collecting body parts after bombings. An older guy in a head covering was behind the wheel. He looked frantic. The ends of his tallit katan tassels were caught in the door.

Lia lurched her Mercedes forward to block the ZAKA van. It nearly ran into them before skidding to a stop.

“Out of the way!” the driver yelled. “I don’t have any money, and the drugs are all in the patients.”

Lia showed her military ID.

“You could have just waved, you know.”

There were already five seriously wounded in the back. They had to put Eitan on the floor of the van.

“This is my last robot IV drip,” the ZAKA driver said. He was called Schlomo and was also a paramedic. “I didn’t have time to sterilize it.”

They strapped the device to Eitan. Lights on it glowed, mostly yellow and a few green.

“You’re lucky you didn’t keep going to Shaare Zedek,” Schlomo said, shaking his head. “It’s not there anymore. Just a crater. Who *does* that?”

Schlomo grabbed the side of the ambulance and looked unsteady; Lia thought the man was going to pass out. In the back of the van, life-support appliances beeped. There were breathing sounds, short moans, and gasps. He now had six patients. If Schlomo couldn’t drive, she would have to take over and have Spencer follow in the Mercedes.

Don’t you dare pass out, you old matzah ball, she thought. *I’ve got to get to Musrara.*

“Sit for a second,” she told the emergency volunteer. “You have any water?”

Schlomo motioned weakly under the passenger seat.

A minute later, the ZAKA man had recovered. The makeshift ambulance started on its way back up to Hadassah Medical on Mount Scopus. Schlomo stuck his head out.

“You’re headed into Old City?”

“Musrara.”

“My advice: don’t go.”

“I have to.”

Schlomo nodded. “Stay off Route 60. It runs right through the Shuafat refugee camp.”

The ZAKA van drove away.

Lia turned and saw Spencer sitting on a box with cartoon characters on the side.

“Wait! Wait!” Lia said, grabbing the cooler. “Don’t forget Eitan’s arm.”

She jammed the box through the passenger-side window. Then Schlomo and his desperate cargo of humanity sped up and were soon out of sight.

“You two could have fit in the front seat and gone with him,” Lia said.

“All the same,” Spencer said, chewing an energy bar from a box Schlomo had given them. “I think we both feel safer with you, Lia.”

“You’re showing us the street ninja skills we knew you had, girl,” Steph said as she sipped a green sports drink.

Feeling like anything but a street ninja, Lia looked around. There was no better vehicle in sight. And even if she could use the crypto-cracking locket to steal a car, she couldn’t risk the owner reporting it. If they were stopped, two Arab women and a foreigner stood an excellent chance of being shot on sight.

“Wow,” Spencer said. “How lucky was that? Eitan’s gonna be fine, and we’re on our way again.”

Lia closed the creaking door of the old Mercedes SUV after her. The American was always irrepressibly upbeat. But Spencer was far from home and could not have been more unprepared to be in the Holy Land during wartime than if he had been from another planet.

“Buckle up,” Lia said, finding the metal end of her own lap strap among bloody bandages and other debris on the floor mat. “Safety first.” She drove off.

45

NEAR THE ISRAEL/JORDAN BORDER WALL JUDEA & SAMARIA

DAVID

David just wanted to lie there. Maybe being captured, just for a while, would be a relief. He eased himself up on one side. Even this close to the ground, the battering his eardrums had taken was giving him vertigo. Miss Aleph sounded as though she were speaking underwater.

“Have we been captured?”

She was flashing her remaining light furiously. He crawled over and brushed off her graphene housing.

“Tell them I have an emergency fund of cyber-currency your wife was saving for a vacation house in Spain.”

“Get a hold of yourself. There’s no one to bribe.”

“Uh, Dave. . .we probably want to leave this area.”

“Another missile?”

“Israeli casualty-assessment drone incoming.”

The new Popeyes deployed a drone while in flight. It saved the jet a trip back to do a body count. He looked around. The missile impact had scattered everything. All the stuff from inside the ATV was spread over fifty meters. Nearby was a suitcase-sized Pelican case; the exterior was partly melted, but it had survived the explosion. Inside was the camo suit. Could he put it on?

“How much time?”

“None.”

The drone started its sweep of the blast crater.

David pried open the latches. No time to put on the suit. But the case could hide him if the burning debris was hot enough to confuse the drone's infrared sensors. He squeezed most of his body under the open box. Surprisingly he fit, all except for his naked left foot.

"Shh."

Miss Aleph texted: It's overhead. Protocol is to try to ID enemy KIA. I hope it doesn't land and try to take DNA from your foot.

It did not. However, before it flew away, it landed twice. David was intrigued. He waited. The Ripclaw fire burned down. It was still dark.

With the camouflage suit on and some of his balance recovered, he was emboldened. The exterior was covered by guanine nanocrystal mesh, which used the same mechanism chameleons used to change color. It worked very well. Better than when he had last played with a prototype in the lab. He dusted off a weapon and walked toward the border wall.

He found two bodies, the ones that had attracted the Popeye's casualty-assessment drone like a fly to... well, dead bodies. They were stripped of equipment and clothing. Two males in their twenties lay face down, shot in the back. The entry wounds looked like they had been made by flesh-carving fléchette canisters.

David sat down.

"So, the insurgent column was moving along the border wall," he said, trying to recreate the scene. "They see the explosion of the Popeye. These two break ranks. Maybe they were curious. Maybe they think their stealth column has been spotted."

Their commander knew better. He had ordered everyone to stay along the wall and trust their concealment. Smart. These guys did not listen; they were shot right away. Ruthless.

Fléchette cartridges were also a good choice if you could get close to Israeli sentries and guards. Trying to penetrate IDF Rhino-Skin armor was a waste of time. Instead, fire something that would hit like a shotgun slug

meant to knock down a grizzly and let it spray two dozen fishhooks into the soft parts of a soldier. These were weapons specialized for breaching modern strong points. There was only one target like that for twenty kilometers.

David wandered to the border wall. Twenty-five feet high with turrets every few hundred yards. Someone had to be watching.

“IDF friendly!” he cried hoarsely. “Major Baumann, Unit 101. Is anyone up there?”

The guard tower remained dark and quiet.

The ground shuddered. About four kilometers to the left, gouts of fire erupted from Jericho. An underground fuel or ammo dump must have exploded. David braced himself against the border wall. The whole damn thing was shaking. Millions of tons of joined concrete were rocking as though hit by the force of some invisible gale. He started walking back to the IDF outpost.

With every step David took, his ankle felt like it would bend like a reed. There was nothing to tape it with. He forced himself to go slow. If he broke a bone or blew out his knee, he would be out of the fight. He had to get back.

Recon. Assess. Survive. Report right to the chief of staff, or better yet, the prime minister herself if he could.

“Any signals?”

“No, Dave. Are you sure we want to go back to Fort Jericho?”

He let pain be his guide as to how far he could push his sagging limbs over the uneven terrain. The camo suit was not meant for extended hikes; the night-vision visor kept fogging.

For the last four hundred meters, there was no wall. Cracked or toppled like dominos, the prefabricated concrete lay in pieces or hung sagging on rebar sinews.

The first Israelis he encountered were grouped in a heap, dead. Seinwicz must have sent out a patrol behind the wall to recon the Popeye missile explosion. They would have run right into the stealth enemy force moving along the wall.

He looked at marks in the dirt. The insurgents had small ATVs, probably electric, nearly silent. He saw an enemy body. The Israeli patrol had been able to engage the infiltrators before they were overrun. A broken weapon was by the enemy corpse.

It was a similar design to what he had seen in Hebron. The larger parts, the receiver and stock, were made of 3-D printed plastic, and the barrel was likely forged by a metal cutting laser or powder bed fusion. Ammunition was held in straight rods forming clips holding very basic centerfire cartridge ammo. He smelled the barrel. Not modern smokeless powder. Something like black powder, judging by the sulfur and urine smell.

This could all have been made in the West Bank. Chemistry was all digital now. Machines donated by Worldwide Help and other charities to the Palestinian Authority were meant to manufacture insulin and other medical supplies. You could synthesize almost any compound anywhere in the world with digital chemical printers, even gunpowder and explosives.

The dead enemy had been a foot soldier, a local recruit. Elite troops with the best weapons had come through the Dead Sea water pipes and linked up with Palestinian elements who were already in the Territories.

David tried to flip the body over, but it disintegrated. Decomposing ooze slimed his glove and a harsh smell rose: ammonia and sour milk. They had tried to clean up after themselves. That would only delay Israel's retribution. Whoever did this would pay dearly.

The gate of Fort Jericho and the command post were obliterated. A one-ton HESCO fortification block looked melted. David poked it with a stick. The wood smoked, the mess pushed in like putty. A super-thermobaric explosion had turned the sand to glass.

His hands and feet were mostly transparent under his camo outfit. Walking through the increasing masses of the dead, he felt like a spectre. In the immolation grounds, he found no survivors, no working vehicles.

"Miss Aleph," he whispered to his handset, "if you hear anyone or see

movement...”

“I will let you know.”

He walked through the flattened gates of the fort, out to the Jordanian side. The shipping containers he had advised Seinwicz to bury and hunker down inside of were there. They lay like a jumble of building blocks. There were large tire tracks incoming toward Fort Jericho, freshly made and stamped down into the ash and battle debris. The enemy strike team he had encountered were the sappers attacking the rear. These were the frontal assault vehicles.

“Scan those tracks.” David gave her a good angle to see them. “Try to find a match.”

David let Miss Aleph have a good look and then moved on deeper into the Jordanian side.

“They are high-end regenerating tires designed for use by long-haul trucks.”

He came to where he had seen the D-9 dozer digging trenches. The V-shaped excavation the dozers had made looked like a fire pit. At the very apex was an oblong shape. Somehow, David knew who it was. It was as though a flaming fillet knife had carved him in half lengthwise. From the back of his head to his heels, he was char-broiled flesh.

David turned the corpse over. It was light and stiff. The face and front of the remains were perfectly preserved. The dead man had on a neatly buttoned uniform and a double-knotted lanyard strung to his pistol. It was Major Seinwicz.

46

AMMAN JORDAN

ELLIE

Ellie's hand gripped the seat padding. Burning parts of their truck spewed smoke and cinders in a trail as it dragged them away from Amman's embattled city center and its plentiful supply of gunmen.

They had just managed to get away from the downtown area when suddenly the truck cab decided to nosedive into the asphalt. Ellie hung on so as not to be thrown through the shot-out front windshield. Even before they screeched to a bone-jarring stop, it became obvious to her they would be proceeding on foot.

The six of them and Marwood left the wreck behind twenty minutes later. No one seemed interested in pursuing them.

"This is Route 437," Sarge Bryan said. "Ten kilometers from the Jericho border crossing."

This time they did not even have the MULEs. There were the usual disagreements as to what should be left behind. Sarge and Atticus carried the largest rucksacks. Nobu and Corporal Singh walked ahead on either side of the roadway, the King Hussein Bridge Road. Mr. Perdix checked his blistered legs for bleeding every so often but did not seem to be in any pain.

A few hundred meters into their hike, Ellie felt edgy camaraderie with

these steadfast warriors, even the strange DARPA man. They had been through a harsh storm of violence and not been killed. Finally, they were going somewhere safe—to Israel.

A dry moaning came from the dark outside their tiny halo of chemlights.

“Don’t look.” Atticus kept her moving. “There’s nothing we can do. We can’t stop.”

Like hell she was not going to look. Ellie grabbed the soldier’s night-vision binoculars.

“Oh,” she said. “Have they been there all along?”

“I didn’t want you to be concerned,” Atticus said. “We’re keeping an eye on them. It’s normal after a city falls.”

All around them, singly and in little clumps, people were streaming away. Many wore only rags. A limping donkey pulled a tottering cart. To Ellie, the sights were something out of a medieval war film, people fleeing a city sacked by the Huns at night. But those were real cries of agony. The figures limping away from the destroyed capital had been shopkeepers, lawyers, hotel clerks. Now they were reduced to ants fleeing homes crushed by a malicious booted foot.

And no film could have prepared Ellie for the smells. Gasoline, harsh cloying vapors of chemical fires, the insides of a horse scattered over the five or six meters between its head and its splayed-out hindquarters. A discarded baby stroller tipped over alongside the roadway. She couldn’t bring herself to check to see if there was anything among the stained bundle of linen balled up inside it.

“The people who still have homes are hunkered down,” Sarge Bryan said, his blue eyes piercing the darkness. “These folks’ homes got blown up. There’s no emergency responders left. They’re likely going to neighboring towns or relatives nearby.”

On the ground near Ellie was a man who looked like a rag-doll version of the albino soldier. He was covered in white dust, probably plaster. He had

dragged himself as far as he could and was waiting for sunrise. He looked up apologetically.

“We’ve got to do something.”

“He’s got no weapons,” Sarge said helpfully.

“Corporal Singh, check him,” Atticus said. “Leave him some water.”

They walked. Ellie now felt haunted by the presence of the spectres of the survivors. She could feel them moving with them, just out of sight. A few hundred steps later, Sarge called a halt. They all crouched down in a ditch by the roadside.

“We got some attention,” Sarge said as he came back to their position. “Heavily armed and on foot.”

“I got no comms,” Nobu said, fiddling with his electronics. “Jordanian military has Harris systems. No one’s talking.”

“Suggestions?” Atticus said. Ellie and the men stayed low in defensive positions.

Mr. Perdix lay flat, face up, speaking to the night sky. “I’m all out of thermobaric drones. We could rig up a triple frag grenade.”

Ellie was peeved. *Kill kill kill* was everyone’s first option.

“Have you thought about chatting with them?” Ellie said. “In my admittedly limited experience, I’ve noticed shooting tends to invite more shooting.”

Atticus shook his head. “I can’t risk anyone going close. They could send out a suicide bomber while they try to encircle us.”

“What about... I don’t know,” Ellie said, thinking quickly, “sending them a walkie-talkie or something?”

Atticus and Nobu exchanged looks and shrugs.

“Okay, we go with Private Sato’s plan,” Atticus said. “If they assume any hostile posture, shoot to kill.”

They attached a handset to a small drone from Mr. Perdix’s inventory. It flew the several hundred meters between them and the potentially hostile

group.

“They didn’t shoot at it. We’re off to a good start.”

As far as Ellie could understand, the general airwaves were inhospitable to wireless transmission. It was like getting zero bars. These handsets were specially linked by frequencies which kept “hopping.” Moments later, formal introductions were made.

“This is Major Abdullah with the Third Jordanian Royal Rangers, identify yourselves.”

Atticus said hi.

“You Americans have showed up late,” Abdullah said bitterly through squawky speakers. “It’s all gone—*chhrr*—monarchy is finished. All dead.”

“Who? Syrians?”

“We don’t know. We think Fedayeen. There was an uprising in the camps of Palestinian refugees. We thought it had quieted down. Next thing, we lost contact with the border outposts toward Iraq. Then the palace was overrun.”

Atticus clicked the mic off. “The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan’s been stable for a hundred years.”

He clicked the link back open. “Listen, Abdullah, we’re a small expeditionary force. Back there in Amman, it’s very bad. No command and control. You’re more likely to get shot by your own troops. Link up with us, and we’ll go to Jericho.”

“Cannot. We are Jordanians. We’ll fight for what’s left of our country.”

Mr. Perdix made sure they got the drone back, but they let Major Abdullah keep the handset.

Miles later, Nobu came back from a scouting run to the Allenby Bridge.

“There’s no bridge.”

“We’re going anyway,” Atticus said with an exhalation of breath.

“Going where?” Ellie could not keep despair out of her voice. “The crossing’s been blasted to bits.”

“Crossing the Jordan River’s only a problem if you get stuck in the mud,

ma'am," Sarge explained. "This far south, it's been dried up for years. My missionary parents came here to see where John the Baptist did his thing; the pastors were advised to bring their own baptizing water."

They struggled forward, keeping well away from the wrecked bridge. Sarge took the most forward position, watching out for land mines and other booby traps. With the threat of the new day weighing on Ellie, they crossed the Jordan.

Climbing up on the Israeli side, Atticus pulled Ellie up the last bit.

"We should get stopped pretty soon," he said to everyone. "Put weapons in unthreatening postures and obey any sentry commands."

"What's that?" Ellie pointed at an odd-looking object.

It looked like a donkey cart that had lost its wheels.

"Junk?" Mr. Perdix said.

Atticus took a closer look with a low-powered flashlight. The object had two bent springs, one was completely broken, and there was a leather basket on the top of a short pole.

"It's a catapult."

"Like from the Middle Ages?" Ellie asked.

"Made with modern materials." Mr. Perdix was instantly interested. "It's more of a hybrid mangonel, to be precise. Built to throw an object about the size of a human brain."

The others looked at him.

"What's it doing here?" Nobu asked. "Some kids playing?"

"Special-ops teams use grappling hooks and crossbows for certain types of missions," Atticus said, bending over the wrecked contraption. "With the tension in those big springs, it could throw something a few hundred meters."

"This design has one advantage," Mr. Perdix said. "It's nearly silent, has no EMF signature, and can be easily constructed out of wood and automobile springs."

"We got trenches," he reported. "And something else. You'd better see."

Ellie raised the night-vision binoculars. The image was getting very grainy. She blinked and realized it was because the sky was lightening ever so slightly. She had learned to dread daylight. Even though flying kamikaze robots could come at you at any hour, there was some comfort in the concealment of darkness. At least they were close now to...

"Where's the wall?" Ellie blurted. There was supposed to be a big reassuring concrete barrier with scads of friendly Israeli troops around.

Atticus stared but said nothing. There was only one way to go: toward the wrecked front gates of the fort. To the left and the right, big slabs of the border wall lay as though some child's play set had suddenly been knocked over by a gust of wind.

Ellie stepped on something. "Gah!" She was sure it was a hidden land mine.

It was not.

"Careful," Atticus said, grabbing her ankle. "Lift straight. Those edges are sharp."

Her foot had broken through a brittle surface.

"You've stepped on glass," the Army man said, appearing to be as mystified as she was.

She looked around. They were in the middle of an outwardly expanding scorch mark.

"There's more, all over," Corporal Singh said, making sure Marwood's bare hands and feet stayed clear of the sharp rubble.

Mr. Perdix said, "This is atomic glass."

"There's no radiation. My eyes would have picked up gamma rays," Sarge said.

"Sand requires more than three thousand degrees Fahrenheit to liquefy," Mr. Perdix said. "Look at this. It's just... amazing."

Then, not far from where they stood, Ellie saw a corpse stir.

"Over there!" Ellie's feet crunched over the unstable surface but did not

poke through again as she carefully stepped forward. “Bugger! Down the crevasse. There’s a woman. She’s alive and badly burned!”

“Wait for us,” Atticus yelled.

Through the dimness of breaking dawn, Ellie saw a youngish woman. She wore green medical fatigues. Both of her forearms ended in curled burnt twig-like appendages. As the shocking sight registered, Ellie realized they must be the fused bones and tendons of her hands. They had been burned to the bone.

Ellie turned away in horror. She searched her bag for water and bandages to help the wounded woman. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a dusty corpse lying face down. It was about thirty yards away.

A small shimmer rose upright from the dead body. Odder still, a man-shaped spirit stepped toward her. In its hand was a gun. The black opening of the barrel was etched in high relief by the first rays of the morning sun.

The muzzle aimed right at Ellie and burst out with flame.

**FORT JERICHO GARRISON
JUDEA & SAMARIA**

DAVID

David looked at the charred body of the Jericho commander. Major Seinwicz must have realized they were being attacked from two sides at the same time, from Jordan and also from the Territories. He had stood right in the top of this trench to rally his troops. The major must have thought he was some kind of First World War hero.

The blast wave that hit him had come from behind. Whoever had attacked Fort Jericho was using the same weapons he had seen at the airport and Hebron. The fireball had seared Seinwicz like a thermal lance.

The silence all around accused David.

Should he have stayed here? Could he have convinced the major to disperse? With hindsight, a dozen strategies came to mind. They could have abandoned the fort, linked up with Jordanian loyalists, they could have...

"Dave, look at your text," Miss Aleph whispered.

He glanced down at the cracked screen.

I hear something. Five, maybe six people, approaching on foot. I suggest we hide.

With his camo suit on, David thought that would be easy. Then he saw the lead scout of the approaching hostile force. The man had glowing electric-

blue eyes.

A damn cyborg with enhanced vision!

Only Russians employed Human+ soldiers. Were they behind this? Israel and post-Soviet Russia had been frenemies for years. Israel had supported the annexation of Crimea and 1.5 million Jews in Israel had originally come from Russia. It didn't make sense. But then today, what did?

David just acted, before revulsion stopped him. He had no idea how large a follow-up force coming in from the Jordanian side was. In Syria, Russian observers would often drop by after a chemical weapons attack to assess casualties in person. They were always backed up by Spetsnaz troopers, many of whom were enhanced super soldiers. Fighting was not an option.

As soon as the white-skinned creature turned his back, David lay down on top of the half-body of Major Seinwicz. His only chance was that the hybrid soldier's augmented vision would interpret his diffused thermal outline as a double image of the dead body.

Lying on top of the stiff charred remains of Major Seinwicz was the most distasteful thing he'd ever done. David could feel charred ribs poking into this own torso through his camouflage suit. He tried to breathe through his mouth. The stench penetrated to his sinuses anyway. It was like putting his face into the cold residue of the most grotesque barbecue pit. It was gritty, sour, and chemical smelling all at the same time. He held his breath.

War had a way of pushing people into unthinkable situations. He could not risk a firefight. But if he confirmed there were only five of them, he'd pick up a rifle and...

"Bugger!" said the very unmilitary voice of a British woman. "Down the crevasse. There's a woman. She's alive and badly burned!"

JERICHO GARRISON

ELLIE

Ellie Sato had never been shot before.

Despite living what she considered a racy urban lifestyle, the worst thing that had ever happened to her was an incident which transpired after a party. She had been conked over the head with a bottle by a mugger who was even more drunk than she was. A famous British actor got out of a cab and ran off the assailant with a silver-handled cane. Afterward, they all had drinks and posted pictures online.

As for shootings, she had always imagined ducking out of the way of bullets as people did in films. However, faced with the real-world situation, she found gunmen did not give you any fair warning at all. They just shot.

Bloody hell!

After the hazy figure rose up from the flat-looking corpse on the burned ground, all she saw, all that was in focus in the pale light of early dawn was a very vicious-looking pistol. Its muzzle erupted.

The *pop-pop-pop* sound had to be the bullets whizzing right through her. She looked down at her chest and braced for the terrible pain of being horribly punctured.

The moment passed. She still didn't feel anything. No gushing of blood or whooshing of air out through new holes punched in her body.

She opened her eyes. Her body felt frozen still of its own accord. The shimmering ghost figure was crouching about twenty yards away. It had coalesced into a man-shaped form wearing a baggy uniform, which looked like it had been sewn together out of silvery space blanket lining. His weapon had made only the smallest sounds and was aimed a few inches to her left.

Behind Ellie, a body dropped to the ground. Atticus and Sarge Bryan reacted instantly.

“Drop your shit, asshole, or I’ll go full auto on you,” Atticus yelled from her right side.

From her left, she heard the sounds of rifle safeties being flicked off.

No one moved, and no one fired.

“Urkggh!”

Ellie turned to see the wounded nurse with the burned-off hands slump over. She was shot dead, wet crimson blossoming on her black-smudged uniform.

“IDF friendly,” the apparition said, his voice muffled by his metallic hoodie. “If you shoot me, you’ll never get your Green Beret beanie back, Attie.”

It took a moment for Ellie to register it as humor. Understandable, considering the abundance of fresh dead bodies, including the one of the apparently helpless woman medic still oozing blood into the scalded sand. Atticus did not lower his weapon. He nudged Ellie behind his broad shoulders.

“I know that voice. Is that a stealth camo outfit, Captain Baumann?”

“I’m going to holster now if that’s okay,” the ghost man said. He spoke with a thick Israeli accent. “And it’s major now.”

The still-smoking pistol disappeared under folds of strange cloth. The hood came back. Underneath was a thirtyish-looking man, his dark dense hair nearly shaved to the scalp. He looked hard and mean like Atticus but in a way that was, to Ellie, a little more scary.

“I assume you’re acquainted with this gent,” Sarge Bryan said. “And we don’t have to kill him.”

“You can put lethal force on hold for now. I know him from Israel-American soldier exchange training in North Carolina. But keep your stun cuffs handy.”

Atticus came forward and shook the other man’s hand.

“I assume you had cause to perforate our wounded civilian here.”

“Sorry for the scare, miss,” Baumann said to Ellie.

His upper body was visible now. From the waist down, his suit projected a weird pastiche of the background behind him—blackened sand, concrete rubble from the destroyed wall, and dead bodies.

“There was no time to warn you. She was about to detonate.”

Major Baumann pulled his outfit all the way off. Underneath, he was a mess. His uniform looked as bad as any of the deceased soldiers lying on the ground.

“Check her fanny pack,” Baumann said. “Carefully.”

“Nobu.”

A few seconds later, their Asian-Apache radio technician waved his arms in alarm and backed away.

“It’s a suicide belt.”

“On a nurse?”

“That’s a fake Worldwide Help uniform,” Baumann said. “She waited until you were not paying attention and all of you were grouped together inside her kill zone.”

It was true. After the device was deactivated and a blood-soaked cloth had been put over the dead woman’s head, Ellie saw it. A fanny pack with wires, cut now, and a detonator the wounded woman had been trying to press even though both her hands were burned to the bone. Something caught Ellie’s attention.

“I know clothes,” Ellie said, asserting her own expertise. “That uniform is

real. It matches the stitching, Fibroin bio-fabricated silk and silver nanoparticles of the spares we had in the truck.”

“You have a truck?” Baumann said hopefully, as he eyed Ellie with more interest.

“What, you think we walked from the Turkey-Iraq border?” Corporal Singh asked.

The Sikh soldier collected Marwood from an uncomfortable-looking Mr. Perdix. During the shooting, the monkey had clambered up the American scientist’s leg and onto his shoulders.

“Iraq?” Baumann said. “Seems like we both have some stories to share. Do you have reliable comms?”

The Israeli sat down and extended his leg. It looked dreadfully bruised and swollen.

Atticus shook his head. Ellie was about to mention her Lux/Net device when Marwood gave off a terrible shriek. They looked, and all they could see was the monkey’s long tail. It was lying on the ground oozing blood, no longer attached to Marwood.

Sarge grabbed Singh’s arm. “No one move!”

Ellie was aghast. First, a ghost had saved them from a suicide-bombing nurse, now Marwood had his tail severed. He curled up in Corporal Singh’s arms, bleeding and in pain.

“Let me check this,” Sarge Bryan said.

No one dared move while his eyes searched the ground.

“America has cyborgs now?” Baumann asked, watching, ready to spring like a coiled panther.

“Far as I know, Sarge Bryan is the only one,” Atticus said. “Because of his albinism, he needed to get ocular augments.”

“Everyone hold very still,” Sarge cautioned. “There are some strange filaments lying around. Less than 0.2 millimeters and razor sharp. This one is attached to this deflated piece of plastic.”

Ellie stood stock still, alternatively looking at the ground in search of this new and completely unneeded hazard and seeing with dismay what it had done to the smallest member of their group. Marwood's hand was also wounded. A cut between the index and middle finger of his small hand had slashed it nearly to the wrist. Singh and Mr. Perdix bandaged that and his tail stump as everyone looked around. The deflated plastic turned out to be a high-altitude weather balloon.

"That's shigawire," Nobu said thoughtfully.

"What?"

"The multipurpose metallic extrusion from the Dune series," Mr. Perdix said. Nobu gave him a look. "Don't look so surprised. Some of the best ideas for weapons systems have come from science fiction books. Yes, I see it. Barrage balloons were used to defend against aircraft attack by raising aloft cables which posed a collision risk. Nanothreads, possibly many kilometers long, could foul even the most advanced jet engines."

Ellie recalled the research she had done before visiting poor Mr. Borkin's factory in Turkey. "Could those be diamond nanothreads?"

The tough-looking Israeli soldier rounded on her as though it had been she who left the nasty things there. "What are their properties? Can they give off electromagnetic radiation?" he demanded, then turned to Ellie. "Who are you anyway?"

"Ms. Sato is cool," Atticus said soothingly. "She's... a spy. One of Britain's best. But not a scientist."

Sarge Bryan covered the vicious, nearly invisible threads with a burned plywood plank. "I can tell you something about the wires. My eyes are picking up strobing EMF. There's a small controller unit on the end of the balloon."

They moved out into the open, away from under the concrete and rebar hanging down from the burned-out gatehouse turret.

"The Palestinians, especially the Gazans, have been known to use

explosive balloons and kites,” Baumann said. “This may be an upgrade of their attacks and one reason radio waves are being interfered with.”

“Ms. Sato has a neutrino phone.”

Ellie dug in her bag. “I suppose you want to call your wife, Major Baumann.”

“Why do you say that?” David Baumann asked, instantly suspicious.

“We top operatives have our methods,” Ellie said. “I noticed a light band on your ring finger. Normally I’d think ‘recently divorced,’ but you keep it on a chain around your neck. That’s so sweet.”

Baumann looked at her with more respect and a little wariness. Ellie concluded that to hang with this crowd, it was good to be viewed as a little bit of a threat.

“Who are the rest of your people?” Baumann asked bluntly. “I need to know; Israel may be fighting for its existence.”

“Do we look like insurgents?” Nobu asked, a little offended.

“No. But neither did the suicide bomber.”

Atticus and Sarge told him their whole story.

“We have a lead on who might be attacking Jordan and Israel.”

Baumann did not say anything, but his body language snapped to attention.

“A group called the Grey Wolves. Heard of them?”

“Of course. They’re ultranationalists,” Baumann said. “But they’re only in Turkey and Europe.”

“We captured two of them.”

“Did they talk?”

“A couple of words,” Atticus said grimly. “Sarge figured out the rest.”

“Grey Wolves have organization, manpower, and the complicit backing of a major government,” Atticus said. “Mehmet Ali Ağca, who shot Pope John Paul II, was a high-ranking Grey Wolf.”

“They got to be some special kind of sinners,” Sarge Bryan said. “Puttin’ a hit on the pope.”

“They didn’t just try once,” Mr. Perdix said. “I recall from lectures on the subject, they tried to kill the pontiff of the Catholic Church dozens of times.”

“You studied that?” Ellie said.

“In Assassination 101. They used some really inventive poisons and delivery methods.”

Mr. Perdix had gone to a college very different from her own.

“The attempts on the pope’s life didn’t stop until all the Italian cardinals got fed up. They held a secret conclave and put a Catholic fatwa on the Grey Wolves.”

“Can they do that?” Nobu asked.

“They gave a *dispensatio*,” Mr. Perdix said, “total absolution, to members of the mafia and associated members of Italian law enforcement if they killed Grey Wolves, their supporters, or stole from them. Instant forgiveness for crimes that paid. It was an offer no religious criminal could refuse.

“The cardinals in Brazil, Poland, and Spain did likewise. A few bloody and costly months later, the Turks received the message and backed off. Pope John Paul II served in his office for another twenty-four years.”

Ellie knew John Paul II as the pontiff who took Vatican couture to a whole new level. It seemed these Grey Wolves people had been tossers for many decades.

“We can talk on the road,” Atticus said, looking back at the smoke columns rising above Amman. They were growing starker every minute the morning sky lightened up to its typical unrelenting clear blue. “The Jordanians are done. We’re a hundred kilometers from Mashabim Air Base in the Negev Desert. There’s a US squadron there backed up by a naval carrier strike group.”

“But, think a minute,” Baumann said. “Jerusalem is only thirty kilometers away. The city is honeycombed with shelters that can survive assault by this new blitzkrieg weapon the insurgents are using. It can melt a hundred-ton steel tank like a cube of sugar in hot tea. This handheld bomb turns sand

berms into molten glass.”

“*What* sort of bombs are they’re using?” Ellie asked.

“I’ll show you,” Baumann said. “But first, Ms. Sato, I must ask you to please stand up. You are sitting on one.”

49

JERUSALEM

LIA

Lia suddenly pulled the Mercedes over to the curb, opened the door, and puked.

There was something caught in her back tooth. As soon as she realized it might be a piece of Eitan, she knew she would vomit. Steph and Spencer, having just loaded the teenager in the back of the ZAKA van and put the icebox with his arm in front, said nothing.

Lia jammed filthy fingers inside her mouth. Her hands were covered in soot, blood, and engine grease. It didn't matter. Whatever was stuck in her teeth, she had to get it out.

It turned out to be a straggly piece of cotton from the delivery boy's shirt. She had bit through that to get Eitan's mostly severed arm completely off. She made sure there was nothing else in there, took a little water, and spat.

"Okay?" Spencer said.

Lia nodded. She slumped back in the flaking and cracked leather of the driver's seat, found a gear, and eased in the worn-out clutch.

On the way to Musrara, Lia stayed off the larger roads. She zigzagged the creaking Mercedes deep into the older quarters of Jerusalem. The roads were narrower. Broad avenues and mini malls gave way to eccentric windy avenues, which were lined with high stone walls.

A car faster than the Palestine special SUV would not have made much difference. Still, Lia gripped the steering wheel in frustration. It seemed they were moving toward her parents only by inches.

“I hope Eitan’s gonna be okay,” Spencer said from the back seat.

“He will,” Lia said. “Hadassah’s been there since the Ottomans and the British.”

“At least that happened, right, Steph?” Being an American, he felt obligated to look on the bright side. “Good ol’ Schlomo. Got to be a good sign.”

Steph said nothing.

They approached Mea She’arim, a Hasidic Orthodox Jewish neighborhood. A series of barriers set fifty meters apart would slow down anyone attacking. Lia noticed dark figures on rooftops armed with more than just rifles.

She hung her military ID out the window and let the sentry get a look at it through his rifle scope. The guard had a conference at the neighborhood’s gatehouse, then he motioned them forward.

“Shalom,” he said.

“We can speak English. You know from my ID I’m Christian Arab and regular IDF.”

“Such a great job you’re doing defending the homeland,” the young Hasidic man said with wary sarcasm. His shirt and kippa were filthy. Distant gunfire pockmarked the otherwise quiet night air. A helicopter in stealth mode whooshed by overhead.

The sentry was fit, well-armed, and bearded. He wore surplus fatigues that were not part of any IDF uniform. He was Orthodox militia. After the Ozar Hatorah shooting in France and the Tree of Life massacre in Pittsburgh, many religious Jewish communities had militarized in their own defense.

“I just need to get to Musrara,” Lia said. “If there’s a better way than through your neighborhood...”

“Who are these two?”

Lia explained the odd couple.

“You can go, Baumann.” The sentry switched to Hebrew. “But foreigners are to go back to their embassies. And Muslims... they can go straight to Indonesia, or Pakistan, or Hell.”

Lia felt herself getting angry. Some guy with a rifle and an armband was making up rules in the streets of the capital? She forced herself to be calm. Then a chill came over her as she realized how vulnerable they were in this isolated avenue with most of the country under siege.

She was unarmed. There were no Jews with her in the Mercedes which had Palestinian plates. These militia might feel they could do what they wanted with them and then make up any story they liked. There was enough mayhem. Who would notice one more blown-up car and three dead bodies burned beyond recognition?

“Your name is Baumann, huh?” he said, looking at her ID again. “Like the chief Ashkenazi rabbi?”

Jewish denominations and their differences were deep waters. In 1947, a large group of ultra-Orthodox had petitioned the UN not to be part of Israel at all because they feared the new state would be too secular. How her father-in-law’s version of Orthodoxy went over in Mea She’arim was anyone’s guess.

No point in fibbing. “He’s my husband’s father.”

“Ah. Wait here.”

After the guy was out of earshot, Lia whispered in fast Arabic, “Steph, are your tits real?”

“They will be in a year.”

If they suspected Steph was trans, there was no telling how they would react.

“If it comes to a strip search, just freak out about being a virgin. Tell them if your fiancé sees you dishonored, he won’t want you anymore.”

Most Orthodox Jews hated homosexuals. Even many moderate Orthodox

rabbis, while allowing for gay thoughts, felt the physical acts were *to'eivah*, something abhorred or detested. While gays were not subject to instant stoning and possible crucifixion as in many Muslim states, not even Rabbi Baumann's lobbying had gotten Israel to sanctify same-sex marriage being performed.

"I know what to do," Steph said nervously. "Thanks, Lia."

A man with a shaved head and a Red Dawn armband came out. He was decked out in so much tactical gear he could have been the cover boy of *World of Firepower* magazine.

"*Chazak u'varuch*," he said. *Be strong, be blessed.*

Lia had heard the response enough times in basic training: "*Chazak ve'ematz.*" *Be strong and have courage.*

"You vouch for these two?"

"I do. He's American. He's just come to pick up his Arab wife and take her overseas."

"Good place for them." The militia leader looked inside the car. The beam of his flashlight found bloodstains, not all of them dried. "Better in America than here, especially after tonight."

Lia noticed a big embroidered patch on this fellow's ammo carrier vest. Drawn on the foreground was the Molten Sea, a wide basin being carried on the backs of oxen. Behind that was the doorway into Solomon's temple, guarded by two huge bronze pillars. Lia had attended Jewish daycare. She knew their names.

"The pillars of the Temple: Boaz and Jachin."

The militiaman smiled. He had two metal teeth implants. "Hashem willing, soon you'll see the real thing on our Temple Mount."

The man with the shaved head got into the Mercedes and rode with them through the fortified streets of the close-knit neighborhood. At the southern gates of Mea She'arim, he handed Lia his sidearm.

"Yankee .45," he said, dropping a box of shells in the passenger seat.

“Bang-bang. Only holds ten in the magazine, so make them count.”

When they passed the last dragon’s teeth barriers bordering the Orthodox stronghold, Spencer exhaled a breath he might have been holding in for twenty minutes.

“Those are our friends, right?”

“Until we get to an IDF base, they are as good as we’ll find.”

Steph did not say anything. The episode probably brought back memories of all the times she had gone through harassment at checkpoints and in airports.

Around a corner, the street was blocked. A green bus was on its side. It leaked fluid but was not on fire. All shops overlooking the narrow street had their metal shutters down.

“Damn.”

The street was too narrow for her to turn around. Lia had enough trouble keeping the Mercedes in forward gears; who knew what it would do in reverse.

“We’ll have to get out.”

To their right was an open swatch of dark. Tennis or basketball courts. The crashed bus had knocked down the fence. Lia climbed up. Daniel Street and Canada House were just on the other side.

“Careful.”

Every step Steph and Spencer made over the metal mesh sent jingling sounds into the darkness shrouding the embattled city.

Lia checked the chamber of the .45 pistol, made sure the hammer was firmly back, and followed.

The space was tennis courts. The nets were down, and there was a gate on the other side. Lia led the way through and came to a short lane. Something small, probably a cat, rustled the bushes as they approached. Right in their path lay someone, a boy, eleven or twelve years old. The spill from the Canada House emergency floodlights outlined him in stark relief on the dark

cobblestones. His head was bleeding. He was not moving.

50

JERICO GARRISON

ELLIE

Just because she had sat down on a bomb, it did not mean her spy cred was totally destroyed, Ellie thought. The damned thing had been half buried, and none of the other soldiers had spotted it either.

They all backed away from the object, slowly at first, then with greater momentum as everyone seemed to recall Major Baumann's description of it being able to melt an eighty-ton tank.

"Is this far enough?" Atticus said, catching his breath after hauling most of their gear about two hundred yards.

Baumann shrugged.

"I recommend three hundred meters," a young woman in Baumann's pocket said. She spoke English with a pleasant Israeli accent. "Please confirm all important electronics, such as me, are well insulated from any blast effects."

"Major Baumann," Mr. Perdix said, staring at the other man's midsection, "you've been holding out on us. What generation AI is she?"

"She's Miss Aleph. My wife's been tinkering with her," Baumann said. "I'm so glad we have her."

"Thank you, Dave."

"Otherwise one of us humans would have to go out and have a closer look at that bomb."

"Dave!"

Moving quickly through the wrecked Israeli fort, Corporal Singh and Nobu scrounged around for supplies. Ellie gathered and tested water supplies with a simple-to-use kit.

“The filthy animals who destroyed Jericho garrison may have poisoned it,” Baumann cautioned.

Minutes later, the men duct-taped the AI’s atrociously battered handset to the arm of a small robot. Miss Aleph continued protesting.

“Why can’t Mr. Perdix go? For all we know, America’s DARPA invented these destructive things.”

Nobu worked the remote control, and the bomb-defusing robot sped to the half-buried target on its caterpillar tracks.

“From what I understand,” Miss Aleph went on, “Sergeant Shetani Bryan’s eyes can detect much more than my remaining sensors. Maybe he should go first.”

Ellie and the others hunkered down in a trench formed by a blast crater and the remains of the border wall.

“David,” Atticus said, “you’ve seen these things go off.”

“Twice.”

“Should we be tampering with it? Why not mark it off and call in experts?”

“We may be the only people who have encountered this new weapon and lived. We *are* the experts.”

“Do you think there are more?” Corporal Singh asked. Marwood was close by, resting and eating some military rations. The bandaged stump of his former tail gave an occasional rather pathetic twitch.

“Lots of bombs,” Ellie said quietly. She remembered the odd ostrich-egg-shaped cavities in the walls of the Worldwide Help relief truck. “There was room for a lot of them in that hidden compartment. That truck was part of a big relief convoy going to feed hungry people in Iraq. There must be dozens of trucks.”

“Hundreds,” Baumann said. “All coming from Turkey.”

“What does Turkey want in the Middle East?” Atticus said.

“Go a few pages back in your history book,” David Baumann said, watching the progress of the robot. “The Ottomans held Jerusalem for five

hundred years. The whole Eastern Mediterranean belonged to them, from the Balkans to Morocco. In Israel, we still measure land in dunams. Most land titles can be traced back to the Ottoman period before the First World War.”

“So Turkey is behind the attacks?”

“Not directly.” Baumann shook his head. “They know we’d murder them. Turkey’s main enemy is Iran, the old Persian Empire. With Iraq finally disintegrating, I’d have been shocked if Istanbul did not take some action to keep a buffer zone between themselves and expansionist Iran.

“Likely the Saudis are involved. Turkey and Saudi Arabia are Sunni-Muslim dominated. Iran is nearly one hundred percent Shi’a Muslim. Sunni and Shi’a have been enemies for centuries.”

Ellie’s aching head spun. Some of this sounded familiar, and she thought about taking notes.

“I’m here.”

Miss Aleph’s resentful-sounding voice spoke through the microphone on Nobu’s remote control. Everyone crowded around. The picture from the small camera on the demolition robot was very low resolution. Ellie could only see a fuzzy ball and shadows. She pretended to study it with interest because that was what a secret agent would do. However, she was just waiting to cover her ears and once again be covered in soot-smelling filth.

“The housing is cracked. I’m taking over this robot’s arm controls to open it wider.”

“I’m picking up beta-particle radiation,” Nobu said.

“Tritium must be inside,” Mr. Perdix said. “It’s commonly used in glowing dials on watches, and of course the fusion component of H-bombs.”

“The only other things in there are some fibers and a crude trigger,” Miss Aleph said hurriedly. “Can I come back now?”

The robot returned, and they looked at the data and samples.

“I know what it is,” Nobu said, cutting the AI free from the hazmat robot. “That is a thermal detonator.”

“Huh?” Sarge said.

“If Luke had set one of those off, Jabba’s whole lair would have come

down on them.”

“This is no time for sci-fi nonsense,” Baumann said testily. No one could blame him. These things had decimated Fort Jericho and killed hundreds of his countrymen.

“I think it is,” Mr. Perdix said almost gleefully. “Remember, the first atom bombs were pretty crude. They used conventional explosives to fire a hollow uranium bullet at a cylinder. It was inefficient, wasteful of perfectly good fissile material, and destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki in a millisecond.”

“What is it and how do we detect them?” Baumann asked briskly.

“Corporal Nobu’s concept of a handheld fusion device is not that far off,” Mr. Perdix said. “I’ll need some time—”

“Look out behind you!” Miss Aleph’s voice blared out in stereo from her handset and Nobu’s remote.

Ellie instinctively reached for her XM25. Even though her whole body hurt, she felt an amazing thrill of empowerment as she pointed her weapon in the same direction as the men. The thrill was enhanced when Atticus gently pushed her shoulder down, presumably to present less of a target to snipers.

“Now what?”

“Enemy infantry advancing from Jericho. You’re about to be surrounded!”

51

MUSRARA DISTRICT JERUSALEM

LIA

“Look, he’s hurt,” Steph whispered urgently and rushed over to the bleeding figure of the boy.

He had fallen just short of the floodlights illuminating the enclosed square in front of the community center.

“Is it safe?” Spencer asked, pointing toward the inert-looking Canada House.

Over the last few hours, they had gone from being on the couch in Lia’s Tel Aviv home to being harassed at checkpoints, taken prisoner by Palestinian police, nearly blown up by a suicide bomber, and dragged further into the worst intifada civil war in Israel’s history.

“It’ll be okay,” she told her friends. She bent down. “Canada House is the strongest bomb shelter in the neighborhood. It’s part of the Red Dawn civil-defense network.”

Lia searched the unconscious kid for weapons.

“Lia,” Steph hissed. “Are you serious?”

It was an IDF reflex; corpse bombs had once been a popular terror method. The boy was still breathing; they had to take him. Lia led as they cautiously approached the entrance.

“There’s the guard,” Lia said.

“Where?”

“Behind that concrete pillar.” It was the best place to locate a sentry. “Stay in a line, sideways, not like we’re trying to hide anything.”

Lia and Spencer carried the boy. He seemed to be stirring but was still out. The sentry turned out to be female and a native Hebrew speaker.

“I’ve got one wounded,” Lia said, crossing the courtyard to the front entrance.

“I don’t know if they have medicine left inside,” the woman said.

“I’m Captain Baumann, Central Command intelligence.”

“Good for you. I just got drafted last week. Who my commanding officer is, I couldn’t tell you. Private Goldstein, ma’am.”

“You’re hurt,” Lia said as they walked toward the entrance and the two thick concrete pillars. Goldstein’s uniform was torn, and she was holding her weapon with only her right arm.

“It’s not bleeding so much.”

There were odd-looking pockmarks on the pillar and wall.

“They came by,” Goldstein said. “Tried to attack. I guess that scared them off.” The sentry pointed to a huge flat piece of blue-tinged metal covering the doorway. Those blast doors were capable of withstanding a truck bomb.

“They were shooting some strange kind of bullets. Ceramic or glass. Not very accurate, but man were they generous with them.”

“How do we get in?”

Goldstein wanded them down for weapons. She double-checked Lia’s military ID then rapped on the metal door with a big pipe wrench.

“You knock?”

“Old-school,” Goldstein said with an exhausted smile.

“I’ll get my friends sorted, find my parents, and I’ll come back out. You look like you could use a break.”

“I’m fine,” Goldstein said. “I could use an energy drink. Anything except

the celery-flavored one.”

The doorway cracked open along a jagged invisible seam. *It must be an electromagnetic locking device*, Lia thought. Canada House had its own generators. She could hear them rumbling in the basement.

Inside the main reception area, people were resting in chairs. Along the far wall lay dozens of wounded. There were blankets, sleeping bags, and all manner of luggage strewn around. Suddenly, she saw a familiar figure up on a ladder. He was replacing a ceiling light. A likewise familiar figure held the ladder steady.

“Pappa, Mom! It’s me, Lia!”

The curly eco-friendly bulb slipped from her father’s hand and crashed to the floor. Lia rushed forward so he would not topple over.

“How?” her father asked as he braced himself on her shoulder. “How are you here?”

“It was a long drive.” She motioned to her companions. “You remember Steph and Spencer.”

They hugged. “We were so worried about—”

They stopped hugging. Lia noticed something. Her pocket felt much too light. Lia felt for her gun. It was gone.

Behind her, a shot rang out. Then another and another. They came from the big impenetrable doorway that gaped open to the square. Goldstein staggered and fell. The blond kid they had rescued aimed the big .45 pistol awkwardly. He emptied the magazine into the female soldier’s torso until there were no more bullets and the slide locked back with a *click*.

From inside the shelter, a Jewish man in a yarmulke rushed toward the locking mechanism. Too late!

Two men appeared in the doorway, dressed in black. They jammed the entrance open with breaching bars. Others stormed in pointing AKs and old rifles.

A lean, lanky man appeared. Smiling, he stepped over the body of

Goldstein. The insurgent leader took the assassin boy by the shoulder. He was still holding the big empty pistol. The man put a headband on the kid's head. It was white with three blood red crescents.

“Listen, Jews and Arab traitors!” he shouted in Arabic. “You are all prisoners of the Grey Wolf.”

JERICHO GARRISON

ELLIE

Ellie watched the bright LED screen of her gunsight. It was just like a video game, except if she had to pull the trigger, the deaths she caused would be real. A figure stepped out from the wrecked main gates of Fort Jericho. Whoever it was had come from Israel.

She thought of that backstabbing fake nurse with the bomb who had tried to blow them to pieces. It made the thought of pressing the trigger and knocking down the yellow outline in her weapon's display not as terrible as she might have imagined.

The man was older. He had a white beard and was dressed all in black. The XM25 rifle display painted him yellow as a potential threat. The weapon's AI decided he was not yet hostile enough to be painted red. The display said the figure was ninety-eight meters distant.

"No one shoot," Baumann said. He cupped his hand and shouted: "*Rav shalom. Medaber anglit?*"

"Of course I speak English," the man, who was pretty old, wheezed back. "You are IDF? Why are you dressed like that?"

Baumann waved to the man and a straggly line of people who emerged behind him, indicating they should come forward to his position.

"These must be Orthodox Jewish settlers who live near Jericho," he said

quietly. “Ms. Sato, you may want to cover your hair if you have a cloth.”

Not this crap again!

Before she could display modesty, shots rang out. Cinderblocks around the old Jewish man erupted as bullets struck near him. Everyone ducked down. The soldiers turned their attention east to the Jordan River.

“The weapon firing is a 12.7-millimeter anti-material rifle. Possibly a Serbian M93 Black Arrow. Not standard equipment for Jordanian or IDF units.”

“They’re shooting at the Israelis coming in through the Jericho gate,” Atticus told Baumann. “Tell them to stay put. Hey, Nobu, does that robot have a drone attachment that works?”

“Yes, but it’s all in Hebrew.”

“Let Aleph control them. Get a bird’s-eye view on the enemy ASAP,” Atticus ordered.

It turned out the wrecked border outpost was a people magnet. Three groups were coming toward them. The Jewish settlers from Israel, a group of Jordanian refugees from the burning city of Amman, and the hostile group to the south, who was picking off anyone who moved. These were the Fedayeen who had wrecked Amman.

“These guys in the south are traveling lean and light,” Sarge Bryan reported. “They’re firing aggressively.”

“And the Jordanians?” Baumann asked.

“Best guess, they are refugees from Amman and some defeated military.”

Baumann clearly wanted to go help out the old guy and his students.

“We’ve got to get the Israeli civilians out of the line of fire.”

“The Fedayeen hostiles haven’t seen us yet,” Sarge Bryan said. “There are twenty or thirty of them heavily armed. Any Israeli backup around?”

“There is no help,” Baumann said grimly.

During a lull in the incoming sniper fire, he waved the rest of the settlers to come in behind better cover.

The Fedayeen shooters were in a fortified position up in a concrete Jordanian bunker. It had been built to watch Fort Jericho. The enemy had the

high ground and had also captured some Israeli tanks.

“I’m open to ideas. Make it quick,” Atticus said.

“Without air power,” Mr. Perdix said, “we’ll be sitting ducks.”

Ellie crawled over to where Atticus and Baumann hunched over pictures coming from the drone.

“Excuse me,” Ellie said, concentrating on keeping her weapon pointed in a neutral direction. “What would you normally do? I mean to blast the evil people to bits?”

“As Ms. Sato knows from her MI6 field training,” Atticus said helpfully, “basic doctrine would be to call in an air or artillery strike.”

“Too bad we can’t drop that thermal thing on them,” Ellie said.

“What good would that do?” Mr. Perdix sneered at her suggestion. “It’s a dud.”

“Maybe,” Atticus said. His sharp features were arranged in his thinking mode, which Ellie thought would look splendid on the cover of some intellectual men’s magazine. “But the Fedayeen don’t know that.”

“Hey!” Nobu yelled. “Whatever you’re going to do, do it quickly. The bad guys have figured out how to steer their captured tanks.”

Everyone crowded around the monitor showing the drone’s view. Before Atticus could shield the view, Ellie saw something no one should witness.

A limping individual—she could not tell if it was a man or woman—was running zigzag away from the tank. The monstrous piece of equipment followed and ran down the wounded person. The head and one arm were recognizable in its treads; the rest was flattened into the gory pattern in the beast’s dusty wake.

“Oh, man!”

Baumann did not flinch. “Miss Aleph, fly the drone and pick up the thermal bomb.”

The Jewish settlers had slowly and safely made their way along the wrecked border wall to their position. The white-bearded rabbi and one of his

students approached. The younger Israeli was a pimply faced thin boy with glasses and curly light-brown side locks coming out from a black hat.

“Can we help?” Between them they carried a big green box.

“You can,” Baumann said, “by giving that DAN .338 to the best shot here.”

“That would be our friendly neighborhood cyborg,” Atticus said.

When they caught sight of Sarge Bryan, the two Israeli civilians nearly dropped the case on their feet. His luminous white skin and glowing blue eyes were startling at first, but Ellie hardly noticed them now.

“David,” Atticus asked almost casually, “where are you going?”

Their new acquaintance was zipping up his stealth suit. He smiled and said, “To get run over by a tank.”

**NEAR THE GAZA STRIP
ISRAEL****TEMIR**

As they approached the sea and Gaza, Temir struggled to keep his force dispersed. Israeli jets and helicopters, visible and cloaked, still shadowed them but seldom attacked and always disengaged quickly. They were unwilling to expose themselves to the ground fire that had decimated the squadron over Jericho.

Temir enforced a doctrine of dispersed movement and swarming attack. Squad phalanxes of 100 fighters were protected by mobile surface-to-air missile launchers. The key was avoiding massing in one area before a swarming attack on a Jewish target. If any group's numbers exceeded 100, Temir ordered the excess soldiers executed.

More than a few group captains were beaten, burned, and shot along the way.

His column was made up of highly trained Grey Wolves and Palestinian rebel fighters from Hebron, Nablus, and Jenin. It also included mayhem-addicted lunatics from Jordan and rape-hungry Sunni bandits from Iraq, even some Islamic State loyalists. Temir embraced them all. He needed them. The hardest fights lay ahead.

He was close now.

“Aga, is something wrong?” Eylül had ridden his all-terrain car up to the small hill. Temir had hardly noticed. He leaned against a gnarled olive tree.

“Nothing. Just keep them moving.”

He was so close he nearly lost his will. In his mind—*his*, not in the mind space Temir the man shared with his mutant symbiont sibling—he replayed a moment. It was the instant his resolve had crystallized like a diamond being formed by millions of pounds of pressure from all sides.

He had been watching the newscast and seen his wife Nazeema shot to death. One moment she had been binding up a wounded Palestinian near the Gaza border fence. The next she was dead, a crimson blotch blossoming on her white nurse’s uniform.

In that instant, he saw what he had to do. All at once, his life and consciousness emptied, then filled to overflowing and solidified. He would make a hajj, a personal unique pilgrimage. Under a golden dome in Jerusalem there was an ancient stone, and through that stone there was... the Well of Souls.

Temir knew his purpose and would make the ends of the world tremble to accomplish it.

Temir recovered, took water, and had an idea.

“How many of that rabble”—Temir pointed his water jug at the poorly armed Palestinian horde—“would the Israelis sacrifice a jet to kill?”

Eylül shrugged. “Two hundred?”

“I think it is higher. I will bet you the finest horse we steal they will not attack until we have four hundred Palestinians grouped up and ready for slaughter.”

As it turned out, Temir lost that bet. He also lost 300 poorly armed fighters to napalm strikes, but the Jewish air force lost two jets and a helicopter.

After smashing through from Jordan into the West Bank, the Grey Wolves’ progress east had been swifter than Temir expected. The Jewish settlers did not come down from their hilltop fortresses to fight. They cowered behind

walls of stone and steel.

The Grey Wolves were the core of the assault, but they were a foreign force. They spoke Turkish. The locals were Palestinian patriots who spoke Arabic. Tens of thousands rallied around him in the shattered city of Hebron. They had come from Dura and Yata. Old veteran cripples from the first and second intifadas had struggled after him, eager to fight the Jews.

Temir had no time or men or weapons or medics to spare to help them. It did not matter. Residents of Sa'ir, with their own hands and blood, tore down the hated walls which had imprisoned them for years.

For the first time in their lives, they tasted freedom from the yoke of Israel's occupation. They filled their lungs with shouts for vengeance. They filled their hands with iron bars, homemade guns, explosives, and rocks. They struggled doggedly along with them forming a wide front as they struck west through the Green Line Wall, then on to Beit Guvrin on the way to besieged Gaza.

After they vanquished the IDF infantry at Beit Guvrin kibbutz, some dirty old imam insisted on leading prayers on the battlefield. Four raka'ats. Four! The swine was wasting time and trying to claim glory that belonged to him and the Grey Wolves.

"Come, father," Temir had told him. "Do us the honor of riding with us."

Reluctantly, the old goat had climbed into Temir's truck. Half an hour later, the cleric left it as brown liquid spewed out onto the road through the septic discharge nozzle.

The only serious resistance they encountered was outside Kiryat Gat. Israeli ground forces had anticipated their path and regrouped around the city of 60,000 Jews.

An armored column backed by helicopters awaited them. It would have been more than a match for any intifada of the past. The IDF had dug in at the best positions to defend the Jewish residential areas. Temir had his troops attack, then appear to falter and become disorganized. Their groups looked

like civilian rioters giving up and fleeing the battleground, not anything like an army gathering for a blitzkrieg attack. Until they struck in earnest.

Grey Wolves suicide bombers in trucks, cars, motorcycles, along with bomb drones, attacked the Israeli tank column from all sides. A lucky Shahid martyrdom sapper managed to kill the IDF commander and wipe out their control area. A fast-moving independently flying drone took out the ammunition storage trailers. The Jewish forces abandoned their useless tanks and fled into the town's bunkers. There they waited, rearmed, and prepared to make a last stand.

Temir ordered a withdrawal. They bypassed Kiryat Gat and blew up the paved roads behind them.

He knew all about the Red Dawn civil-defense system. He had been given details about its inner workings. It was very effective for slowing an enemy down. He would not be sucked into that trap. His hajj could not be delayed. He needed every fighter. He had to get something from Gaza.

...

A few kilometers later, Temir left his truck and got in the first armored jeep that passed. He needed to see what was going on across the battlefield.

On the road south, Temir saw a boy. He was probably not yet ten years old and not strong. The years of malnutrition and helplessness enforced on these permanent refugees in their own land had taken its toll generation after generation.

He stopped his jeep.

"You!" Temir shouted.

The boy spun around, thankfully not wetting his pants.

"How old are you?"

"Fifteen."

Admirably quick with a lie. Temir towered over him.

"If you can draw my blood with... that rock, you can fight. If not, you must go home."

The rock was a large one, and the boy had trouble even getting it out of the sticky roadside mud. He ended up heaving it impressively, only to anticlimactically drop it on his intended victim's booted foot.

It hurt mildly. The symbiont around his midsection quickly quelled his pain receptors. Through neurological pathways now fully linked to his brain stem, it also let him know no bones had been broken.

Temir looked down sternly. "You are too small. Grow up and grow strong to fight another day."

"But..." the boy said, disappointment etched on his small features. "My father says it's them or us. The Grey Wolves will kill all the Israelis, then we can live in peace in our homeland."

"There will always be oppressors to fight. The world never runs out of them. Go."

A parent or a relative who was minding the boy came up, apologizing.

"Those are my orders. Make sure they are obeyed."

The would-be recruit reluctantly marched east, away from the fight.

So, too, did a young woman. She hunched over, her head covering drooping over her face. She was downtrodden, tired, perhaps shell-shocked from the fight in the town behind them.

Seeing her weakness, Temir was disgusted. His second mind, the one inside the translucent symbiont, also sent a ripple of disapproval up his spinal column. It told him to *kill*.

"Woman, where are you going?"

"B-back to my village, Aga Temir. I'm hungry and tired. Everyone was leaving, so I followed. I can't go on, I..."

Temir had enough of her blubbering. He grabbed her shoulders. His motion was so quick the young woman froze like a startled bird waiting for the snapping fangs of a snake. She weighed not much more than a bird. She could barely flutter in his iron grip. He would only have to close his hands round her thin supine neck...

“The fight is that way, in Gaza,” he whispered, barely audibly, certain she was hanging on to his every word.

“After all this.” He motioned to the field of charred dead in the distance, the thousands marching toward Gaza, the smoke rising from Kiryat Gat. “After I have sown the seeds for your ultimate liberation, you would hang your head and drag yourself back? Back to the filthy West Bank hovel your occupiers allowed you to live in? And there to lie like a useless sow until the Israelis decide to take that away from you too?”

It would be so easy to pulverize her neck bones and feel her go limp.

He lowered his voice further, so it was the same pitch as his heart throbbing under the embrace of the symbiont.

“I had a wife. She was from Palestine. She left her safe home in Jordan and came back here, back to Gaza, to care for ingrates like you. The Israelis shot her dead. In front of my eyes, in front of the world, they shot her dead. No one cared then. But they will. I am going back to... to redeem...”

His voice choked silent with emotion.

The girl had enough courage to speak. “Aga, sir, w-what was her name?”

Just then, Temir decided not to kill her.

“She was called Nazeema al-Akel. She was a nurse. And you are unworthy of dying in her footsteps.”

He yanked her around like a rag doll and motioned to one of his officers.

“Take this one. Give her a weapon and put her on the front lines at Sderot. She will learn to kill her enemies or you will blow her head off.”

“Yes, Aga Temir,” the officer said, taking charge of the reluctant resistance fighter.

“Pass the word,” Temir said. “Let it be known by all: tonight we break the siege of Gaza!”

JORDAN-ISRAEL BORDER**ELLIE**

The Jewish settlers who joined them could not believe all the Israeli soldiers from Fort Jericho were dead.

“There were thousands here, with tanks and machine guns,” the older man said aghast, his face blanching. The rabbi led a group of much younger students into their trenches.

“Keep your head down,” Ellie reminded him, feeling she was becoming an old hand at being in the middle of firefights. “They’re still shooting this way from the Jordanian outpost.”

“Thanks, Miss...” the Jewish cleric said, looking at her with suspicion.

“This is Lieutenant Commander Sato of British Security,” David Baumann said sternly. “Do what she says, and you and your students might live through this.”

Along with a watchtower and fortifications, the enemy Fedayeen had captured three Israeli tanks. They were driving them erratically on the flat plain area that led to the River Jordan.

“We need to suppress the small arms fire coming from their strong point and let David try his idea,” Atticus said.

To Ellie, David’s idea to stop the big tanks from squashing the civilians sounded nuts. Baumann flipped up his hood and turned on his active camo

gear. A few seconds later, he assumed the color and texture of nearby surfaces.

“When I first scanned over you,” Sarge Bryan said, hefting a rifle that looked almost as alien as he did, “you had me fooled. Now that I’ve adjusted my eyes, I can see you plain as day. If their shooters have good optics...”

“They’ll splash my guts before I have a chance to neutralize the Merkava,” David said. “That’s why you need to distract them.”

The legs of Baumann’s suit had taken on the color of the ground he stood on. His words seemed to come out of the top of a pillar of dirty salt.

Sarge Bryan looked down from his firing position. “Ms. Sato, ma’am, would you do me a favor? I need all these rifle magazines filled with the bullets that have the eye design on them.”

“All of them?” Ellie asked, looking at the bewildering array of bullets in the weapons case.

“Yes, ma’am. There’s gonna be a whole peck a killin’, and we’ve got to make sure all of it’s done by us.”

Baumann did not wait for the distraction. He dashed out and made for some rocks at the edge of their trench line. The Fedayeen were about a kilometer southeast of the burning Fort Jericho. The Jordanian refugees making their way to Israel were strung out in small groups directly east. Among them, the trio of captured Israeli tanks drove erratically, belching exhaust smoke.

“They’re shooting the civilians to hem them into where the tanks are prowling,” Corporal Singh said, lowering his binoculars. He was visibly upset. “Then they are just squashing people like it’s a game.”

At intervals, small ineffectual popping sounds were punctuated by the large roar of a more powerful weapon.

“First thing is to shut down those Fedayeen with the big-caliber rifles,” Nobu said into his drone controller.

With all the radio interference, Miss Aleph was doing the flying. With her

on board, the drone had picked up the dud thermal bomb and was carrying it toward the sandbagged position of the Fedayeen.

“The drone is strobing its lights to make sure they see what it’s dropping,” Nobu said. “They’re firing up at it. Touchdown!”

“They shot my rotor! I’m leaving!”

The first part of the plan went well. The Fedayeen killers paused for a comical second, then they all recognized the dark-gray ostrich-egg shape that had been dropped in their midst: a bomb that could level 200 meters in all directions.

Some jumped out of their fortification; others ducked down and covered their heads. None of them saw Baumann’s ghost image dash across the open plain or his sideways dive under the leading tank.

“Captain, you know this Baumann guy from where?” Nobu asked.

“Green Berets and Israel’s army have a long-standing exchange program.”

“Was he always nuts?”

Atticus shrugged. “After he got married, I thought he’d be more laid-back.”

Ellie was perplexed. Now that the Fedayeen snipers were scattered by the fake bomb and under fire themselves from Sarge’s long gun, she was trying to make sense of things.

“Why is Major Baumann running in front of the tank?”

“Merkavas have an escape hatch in the back,” Atticus explained as they watched video coming from the drone. “David should be able to open it like an Israeli rescue squad would do to extract a wounded tank crew.”

The tank clanked and rumbled on. Baumann’s half-visible image disappeared under its front. Then his legs, all silvery and covered with muck, poked out from the back. For a horrible second, Ellie thought the tanks had cut him in half and his torso was being dragged along. Then Baumann’s partially camouflaged legs disappeared. A moment later, the tank stopped.

“Bet they didn’t expect that,” Mr. Perdix said. “Someone coming in through the back door.”

A few tense minutes later, the Merkava, which Ellie had learned was a main battle tank, started up again. This time it drove with much more assured movements. Two bodies rolled out of the back. The tank pivoted back to the enemy's positions.

"Sarge, get ready," Atticus said. "He's going to flush them out. Everyone else, protect your ears. It's going to get noisy."

That was true from several sides. Despite skepticism from Mr. Nobu that Baumann could steer the Merkava and shoot its cannon at the same time, he made short work of the other two stolen tanks.

His tank shot once, then again. The first enemy tank's side crumpled, and it rolled to a stop. The turret of the other blew up sixty feet in gouts of flame and debris. Baumann next went after the enemy troops.

Ellie pressed her earmuff-style protectors over her ears as Sarge's rifle went *kathoom!*

Sarge's weapon roared repeatedly. Each time, a second or two later, an enemy figure dropped grotesquely. Ellie quietly felt a small keening of relief with every "tango" that went down.

"That was incredible. Sarge Bryan never missed," Ellie said, taking her ear protection off.

"That's what he'll tell you," Nobu scoffed. "He was cheating. Those special bullets with the eyeball painted on them home in on a laser bull's-eye projected from the scope."

"I'm just glad it's over."

"Nothing's over," Atticus said with a note of urgency. "All the racket we've caused has given away our position. A force ten times that size could be incoming. We also have to square away the Israeli civilians and the Jordanian survivors, make sure they're as safe as they can be before we move out."

Major Baumann drove up in his recaptured Merkava. Emerging from the top, he was sweaty, bloodstained, and stripped to the waist. If the work he

had done had not been so gruesome, Ellie could have pictured it as a layout in some sort of manly men's magazine featuring do-it-yourself plumbing and roofing.

"That wasn't exactly by the book," he said, "but I'll take it."

No longer under enemy fire, the clumps of civilians fleeing from Jordan's capital coalesced into a long line. The only working vehicle was the tank. Baumann drove it back and forth; some of the worse-off people rode on top and clung to its sides. They were all at the outpost faster than Ellie had anticipated.

"Captain," Ellie said, "it looks like many of these people are wounded. There isn't much left here, and who knows what's going on inside Israel. What can we do?"

"I got an idea," Atticus said. "Probably no one is going to like it."

The leader of the Jordanians was a tall skinny fellow. He was missing an ear, and his right arm was bleeding through its bandages.

"Major Abdullah," Atticus said in greeting. "You know, you could have just mailed me back my radio."

He must be the Jordanian Army fellow they had spoken to on the radio the night before.

Atticus's prediction came true even before he announced his plan. Not everyone was happy. As soon as the rabbi saw the Jordanians, he yelled something in Hebrew and reached for his rifle.

"Rav!" Baumann yelled, restraining the civilian. "With all respect, shut it and stand down."

The bearded old guy did not shut it and switched his cursing over to his fellow Israeli.

Miss Aleph got into it, speaking from David's trouser pocket.

"Rabbi Niran of the Yitav settlement: IDF Military Order No. 783 requires you to give aid and assistance to any soldier or unit as you best can in the Occupied Territories.

"You also may want to know you are addressing Major Baumann, the son of Israel's chief rabbi."

Things settled down. Ellie noticed the yeshiva students looked nervous and

stayed in a group. There were wounded Israeli soldiers among them.

“What happened to you in Israel?” Ellie asked them.

“We heard the shooting,” said a gangly student with long forelocks. “We left the archaeology dig at the old synagogue. These soldiers were our military escort. They got shot by whoever destroyed the base.”

“Who did these field dressings?” Atticus asked.

“Me. I went for medical corps during my national service.” He shrugged his slim shoulders. “My parents didn’t like it. They’re against the military, but I told them combining military service and religious study in Yeshivat Hesder would help me get into medical school.”

“Great, you’re hired,” Baumann said. Then in a lower voice, added, “Take two of your group and Sarge Bryan, scrounge for medical supplies. Then do your best for Abdullah’s wounded. We can’t stay here long.”

The boy insisted on looking at Baumann’s leg first.

“It could get infected,” he said.

“So?”

“You could lose it.”

“In days, maybe. This war could be over in hours,” Baumann said gruffly. Still, he slowly pulled the boot off his swollen foot. “Judging by Sarge, we’ll all be cyborg soldiers soon.”

“Major,” Sarge Bryan said, grinning, “I’d advise you to keep your original specs. Tune-ups are a pain.”

Baumann looked on disapprovingly as the student medic rolled up his sleeves. “Kid, look at your arms. I’ve seen fatter chicken bones. For sake of Moses, stop with the Daf Yomi tutoring and lift some weights.”

“I’m active reserve! I’m going to be an IDF rabbi,” the boy protested.

“That is a great calling,” Baumann joked. “If I lose my foot, the first ass I’m going to kick with my prosthetic will be yours.”

Ellie thought maybe all Baumann’s joking was an attempt to distract himself from the pain as the younger man took a small scalpel and debrided

charred flesh from his ankle.

On the other side of the trenches, Atticus was busy rounding up provisions and any working transport besides their tank. Ellie went up to the Jordanian Arab group.

“Major Abdullah,” Ellie said, introducing herself with confidence, “I’m with the UK Foreign Office. I was wondering if you could you clarify a few things?”

“Damn place for a spy,” said the wounded Jordanian officer. “Don’t you people usually vanish before the shooting starts?”

“We only make it seem so,” Ellie said. “Ah, let’s start with the Grey Wolves.”

Abdullah sat up sharply, leaking pink fluid from his arm cast. “Where did you hear that?”

“Told you,” Baumann said sharply. “She’s British Intelligence. You better not be holding anything back. You don’t want to make her angry.”

“I have to first report to...” Abdullah mumbled.

“Who?” Atticus said gently. “Look around. Jordan has fallen, the last Hashemite dynasty with it. Army units are deserting their posts and forming into local militias under local faction commanders. Israel could be next. We need everything you’ve got.”

Abdullah’s unit had captured a few stragglers from the force that took down Jericho. Under harsh incentives, one of the prisoners revealed he was part of a larger force that had been training in Cyprus and Somalia for years.

“How large, he didn’t know,” Abdullah said. “They kept the units separated. Our prisoner felt it was five divisions at least. Fifty thousand men and women.”

“They called themselves Grey Wolves?”

“The units all had different titles and insignia and were trained by different contractors. Some Russian, others Asian and Afghan.” Mr. Perdix sprayed a reddish substance on Abdullah’s arm wounds, and he calmed down,

becoming almost drowsy. “They were mobilized over the last few weeks and only knew their destination after they were on the false-flag relief trucks.

“Along with food and medicine, the convoy also carried the most modern infantry weapons available. They were supposed to link up with the Sunni militia in Iraq and hold Baghdad against the coming Iranian invasion.”

Iraq had tried to invade and take over Iran in the 1980s. After eight years of fighting and a million dead, the border was not shifted an inch. With Iraq disintegrating, no wonder the Iranians were itching for revenge and territorial conquest.

“Why attack Israel?” Even Ellie knew that was insane. “They’re the strongest military in the area by far. There’s no chance of holding any Israeli territory.”

“Unless...” Abdullah said finally, “unless your cause *is* chaos.”

...

After Baumann’s leg was fixed up, he still looked anxious. He pulled Atticus away from the group and behind some fallen concrete barriers. Ellie followed—it was her duty to Britain to be nosey.

“A hell of an improvisation out there,” Atticus said, looking at the burning tanks and then over at the fallen domino blocks of the border wall receding into the distance. “Now what?”

For a moment, the men were quiet and seemed a little stunned.

“It’s obvious,” Ellie said. Whether it was her place or not, she felt she had to contribute to the common goal of surviving until tomorrow. “We get word to the Foreign Office and your superiors in the US military. With the valuable information we have, they’ll make our rescue a top priority. We’ll get the refugees sorted, and they’ll devise a plan to counter these Grey Wolves and bring the conspirators to justice. Before things get out of hand.”

“Things *are* out of fucking hand,” Baumann whispered. “My brother, the acting minister of defense, has two nuclear devices. I think he’s going to kill the two million Palestinians in Gaza.”

**CANADA HOUSE
JERUSALEM**

LIA

“Listen, Jews and Arab traitors!” the lanky wild-eyed man shouted in Arabic. “You are all prisoners of the Grey Wolves.”

Lia had just reunited with her father and mother in Canada House when the insurgents came bursting in. Before she could feel disgusted by her own stupidity at having her gun stolen and used to shoot the sentry, she saw another problem. In the back of the crowd of civilians, a guy nearly old enough to have fought in the Independence War struggled with the bolt on a rifle.

“No!” Lia yelled and lunged toward him.

She grabbed the weapon and slid it toward the Grey Wolves.

“What?” The old man’s watery eyes looked accusingly at her. He saw her dark skin. “You are with them?”

“No. I’m with my parents,” she said in perfect Hebrew, motioning to the equally dark-skinned couple standing dumbfounded by the ladder. “Look where we are. One firebomb in here, and we all go up.”

The man nodded and backed up to the wall, his hands shaking as he stared at the heavily armed insurgents by the big steel doors of the bomb shelter. One thug came over from the entrance and slapped him, but only once.

Hostage situations are part of IDF basic training. Ninety percent of fatalities occurred during ten minutes: the first five and final five.

Lia saw six armed men inside the entrance. Maybe three times as many outside. The community center held a few hundred people. All were civilians, many of them elderly; Lia saw it was no use fighting. Not now.

There had to be a secondary exit from Canada House, possibly underground. Goldstein the sentry and the Red Dawn civil-defense leaders would know where it was and how to access it. But Goldstein lay in a smear of blood by the entrance. She was dead.

The sentry moaned.

Or not.

Seeing the oversight, the insurgent leader raised a long knife to decapitate Goldstein.

“Maybe you wait on that, sir,” Lia said in Arabic.

“Shut up and get back in there.” The man pushed her, and thankfully it was in the direction of her parents. Lia made a show of making sure her parents were okay. As she did, she slipped her Israeli Defense Forces ID to her father. Steph and Spencer looked like they were going to move toward her or say something. She waved them down.

“Of course, sir,” Lia said. “You may do as you please. Kill the oppressor bitch. But that one may have access codes and information you need.”

The leader of the insurgent group was a tall skinny fellow. He might be younger than she was. He had probably risen through sheer aggressiveness. He approached her with the saw-bladed knife.

“ID now, Jew lover.”

Lia handed over her blue Israeli citizen ID.

“Lia Suleiman?” He eyed her with beady dark eyes which held suspicion but no longer outright bloodlust. “I am Tariq, the hand of the Grey Wolves in Jerusalem.”

She was thankful she had kept her maiden name on her civilian ID. In

today's Israel, it was much better to be Jewish, most of the time. However, once in a kidnapping, being an Arabush could be a lifesaver. Medium-blue IDs were for Arab citizens of Israel. Lia's had no indication of her IDF job or rank. There were special codes in the serial number classifying her as Arab Christian.

A smile crinkled the vicious young man's stubble-covered face.
"Suleiman... Ah, like the sultan who built Jerusalem's walls, no? Maybe you know a secret way into the Old City."

"I am but a woman. How would I know such things?" Lia said. She motioned to the surprisingly not-dead Goldstein. "But she might know where the Red Dawn roadblocks and ambush points are. They don't tell us anything."

"What do you mean 'us'? You spoke Hebrew to that old goat."

"If a slave wants to eat, he speaks the language of the masters."

He studied her for a moment. Lia decided on a story if he asked about her rings. Luckily David had little money when they got married, so the jewelry did not look suspicious.

"The Jews will understand you, then."

"Let me see if she can be of use to you." Lia prodded Goldstein with her foot.

The man nodded. Lia dragged the wounded woman inside to the makeshift medical area along the far wall of the community center. Her outer clothes were perforated, but she had wraparound Rhino-Skin armor underneath. The worst wound was a glancing bullet to the back of her head. With her mass of blood-soaked hair, there was no telling how serious it was. A bullet fragment could be deep inside her brain.

"Lia Suleiman, speak to my prisoners in your finest Hebrew," Tariq said.
"Tell them their new masters are the Grey Wolves, and I am their emissary. Second lesson: This knife is very sharp. So everyone behaves or else..."

The throat-slitting motion he made needed no translation. The twelve-year-

old Arab boy who had tricked her with his fake wound and feigned helplessness looked at Lia and the other captives with horrid anticipation. With a dirty smile, the kid mimicked Tariq's neck-slicing motion.

JERICHO GARRISON

ELLIE

Well, Ellie thought, that was quite the twist, two rogue nuclear weapons were now in the mix. At David Baumann's rather shocking news, she, Atticus, and Major Baumann stood stock-still for a moment behind the rubble of the former Jericho garrison. In addition to their other woes, the threat of genocidal mass murder had just been broached. Ellie Sato decided there was only one thing for it.

"Gentlemen," she said quite firmly, "it's time for tea."

From her experience dealing with newspaper editors and media empire owners at the *Citizen Juggernaut*, Ellie had gained insights into when men were stymied and just trying to bluff their way through. She concluded these two had not a clue what to do, and without her help, everything would end up at sixes and sevens.

"If you'll point me to where the garrison's kitchen used to be," Ellie said evenly, "I'm sure I can find the makings."

"Tea?" Baumann blurted.

He was bleeding from a dozen little cuts and still ashen-faced after his admission about his own brother's possible plans to kill everyone in Gaza.

"This is no time—"

"Gentlemen, this is the perfect time," Ellie cut across the dangerous-

looking man, who had moments ago singlehandedly wiped out dozens of enemies in a tank. “I insist.”

“Ellie—” Atticus began.

She cut him off too. “I’m only here because things went very wrong.” She was afraid she sounded rather cross, but that could not be helped. “Things went wrong in regards to matters over which I had no control. Or even a high level of awareness until very recently.

“At this point, I am only certain of one thing: It would be a grave mistake indeed to dispense with insights and grounded common sense that I can offer. So, who takes sugar?”

...

All she could find in the wrecked storeroom of the Israeli fort was a rather limp Wissotzky peppermint tea. She boiled her certified-not-poisoned water over the naked flame of a badly banged-up propane stove. They chatted about nukes.

“Israel has never come out and declared itself a nuclear state,” Baumann said. “The actual command and control, even knowledge of location and delivery systems, is very limited to a few people in the government and the military.”

“You must have a nuclear response team,” Atticus said.

“Of course, but they’re part of Shin Bet.”

“The internal security people who were helping your brother,” Ellie said.

“Who do you trust?”

Baumann thought for a moment. “The chief rabbi, my father. He’s the only one I can be certain of. If he has been compromised, all is lost. Israel would then be better off going back to the pharaoh’s salt mines.”

Before David Baumann could elaborate on his brother having a pair of nuclear bombs, Ellie held her finger to her lips.

“Shh.”

She saw Mr. Perdix’s pants leg through a bullet hole in the wall. The little

sneak was eavesdropping.

“Why don’t you join us?”

The DARPA scientist came out. His feet were newly bandaged, and he seemed to have no trouble walking on them.

“Right, then,” Ellie said. She gave everyone a refill and handed Mr. Perdix a chipped mug with a gnome figure on it. It was obvious they could no longer talk about Baumann’s brother. She switched topics.

“Mr. Perdix, so glad you wandered by. We need to know about these thermal bomb things that keep going off. What exactly are these terror weapons?”

Mr. Perdix looked more pleased with himself than usual. “Now we know where all those surplus diamond nanothreads from Borkin’s factory have ended up.”

Ellie shuddered inwardly, recalling how her secret mission had started. *Poor Mr. Borkin.*

“Diamonds aren’t explosive,” Atticus said.

“Not by themselves,” Mr. Perdix agreed. “But combined with the new physics principles of warfare, they can be used in devices called Voitenko compressors.”

Miss Aleph piped up from Baumann’s pocket: “‘Thermal detonator’ has more of a ring to it. However, I agree with the rest of the human’s analysis. These bomblets are shaped charges directing exponentially increasing shock waves to a small one-millimeter tritium core. The high pressure turns the tritium into fusion plasma.”

“So these devices are mini H-bombs?”

Mr. Perdix fumbled with his tea. It was hot, and his gnome mug had a shrapnel hole in the top. “Much better. The tritium core fuses into pure energy. No radioactive waste products.”

Atticus scoffed.

“Countries have spent fortunes trying to start fusion-power reactors,” Baumann said skeptically.

“Assuming they exist, what about countermeasures?” Atticus asked. “Can

we defuse them over a wide area or at least track them?”

“Insulated, they won’t be detectible,” Mr. Perdix said. “Non-nuclear electromagnetic pulse might fuse the triggering mechanism over an area. Or it might set them all off.”

Ellie felt her head had been filled with more technological information than was probably healthy for a non-scientist to have. Shouts came from the other side of their encampment.

“Khinzir!”

“Arabush!”

They did not sound like terms of endearment.

Ellie and the men dashed around the rubble of concrete and twisted iron rebar toward the infirmary area. Her feet slid around in her too-big army boots. If she ever got her feet into civilized shoes again, she vowed to never take them off, even in bed.

“Major Abdullah! Rabbi Niran!” Baumann yelled.

Atticus barked, “Stand down.”

Both men had their hands on weapons.

“We pull your asses out of the fire, and you start getting ready to kill each other?” Atticus asked, exasperated.

“Actually, young American captain,” Rabbi Niran snapped back, “you did not rescue us. Your group is on Israeli land, and you are forcing our medic to use our resources to treat these wounded Arabush.”

“Spoken just like a Jew!” the Jordanian muttered.

Baumann blew up into a stream of mixed Hebrew and Arabic. Likely the filthiest things he could think of in both languages. He grabbed the two men’s weapons and threw them over a broken wall.

“The next asshole who uses an ethnic slur gets put in handcuffs and gagged with a handful of camel shit.”

IDF Major Baumann was one of those serious people, like Mr. Borkin and some diva fashion designers. He was not speaking figuratively.

Hearing the disturbance, Sarge Bryan also came up alongside Baumann and Atticus. Their first close-up view of the African-American albino with cybernetic glowing blue eyes shocked the belligerents into silence.

“Captain,” Abdullah said to Atticus, “several of my men are badly wounded. There are only a few vehicles in working condition. I need to take them back to my home village.”

“The Grey Wolves Fedayeen are all over.”

Abdullah shook his head. “From what my prisoner told us, all Grey Wolves units were ordered by their leader, Aga Temir, to enter through the Jericho gates and disperse into Israel. Those stragglers we fought just now were mere bandits.”

“So it’s safe there in your village in Jordan?” Atticus asked.

Ellie could tell he was leading up to something.

“My village is near the Ma’in Hot Springs. It’s an ancient fortress carved into the hill like Petra. The mayor is my cousin. There we will have shelter and rest.”

“We need those trucks that we came in,” Rabbi Nirán said. “The IDF soldiers from our escort are hurt.”

“Not as badly as my men,” Abdullah said. “They were attacked by out-of-control Israeli drones!”

“There’s an easy solution: You both have the trucks,” Atticus said firmly. “Because you Israelis and you Jordanians are going to go together.”

“I’m not going anywhere with these...” Rabbi Nirán looked at Baumann. “People.”

“You both have wounded, correct?” Ellie said. “You cannot stay here, and our group has an urgent secret mission.”

“Those trucks are IDF property. I’m taking them to the nearest settlement,” Rabbi Nirán said firmly.

“No, you’re not,” Baumann snarled. “Best case, you’d be shot by nervous Jewish sentries. At worst, you run into Grey Wolves. I’ve seen them in

action. You won't like that."

"If the medics treat the wounded equally, Rabbi Niran and his students can all come with us," Abdullah said.

"Into Jordan? The demon's den? That will be the day." Rabbi Niran turned to Baumann. "You are IDF. Are you going to abandon us?"

"You heard Ms. Sato. She's a top-level British Intelligence officer," Baumann said. Ellie thought she saw his eyes roll ever so slightly. "We have a mission vital to the survival of Israel and the region."

"Looks like you'll have to rely on each other," Atticus said to the Jordanian soldier and the rabbi. "Abdullah, there's an Islamic hospitality tradition, right?"

"Yes. 'The one who denies a wayfarer his surplus water is one of three persons at whom God will not look on the Day of Judgment,'" Abdullah said. "I promise to give all who come with me the protection of a guest under my roof."

After some grumbling, the thing was settled. People hurried off to take care of the remains of the fallen, find provisions, and keep watch for incoming hostiles.

Just as the sun's rays beat down vertically, the small tattered Jordanian-Israeli convoy took off south.

"You realize those are the only trucks I could get into working shape," Nobu said, wiping axle grease off his hands.

"I don't think we can make it to Jerusalem on foot," Corporal Singh said. Marwood clung to his owner's neck with one hand, held his tail's stump in the other, and tittered in agreement.

Baumann was upbeat, or at least less dour. He led them behind the wrecked border wall. Near the remains of a toolshed, he and Sarge Bryan pulled open a hidden bunker.

"We're not walking, or driving."

**CANADA HOUSE
JERUSALEM****LIA**

All during the long hours Lia and the others were Tariq's prisoners, his twelve-year-old apprentice leered at them, eagerly awaiting more mayhem. The murderous punk was really enjoying himself.

After Lia became Tariq's official Hebrew translator, she was able to observe Tariq and the others more closely. Her Arab Christian identity allowed her to be an emissary between the insurgents and the prisoners who were mostly Jewish. In a minor positive development, they ignored Steph and her husband, even though Spencer was clearly American.

"Pull your pockets out, bitch," the preteen terrorist yelled in Arabic at Lia. The kid was really getting on her nerves.

Lia also hated the nasty youth because she had fallen for his Trojan horse wounded-kid routine.

"There," Lia said, shedding lint and powdered grit as she turned her pockets inside out.

The apprentice terrorist stared after her as she went on the errand Tariq had assigned her.

Watching Tariq manage his platoon of about twenty men, she had come to some conclusions. She had seen the Grey Wolves destroy an Israeli armored

column in a few minutes. Whoever Tariq and his chums were, they certainly did not belong to the core of the insurgents doing real damage to Jerusalem and all over Israel.

Tariq talked a lot about how things would be after their genocidal revolution. Arabs would be in charge. Jews and their Druze allies would be placed in Gaza Strip-style concentration zones.

Yet, besides the rather simple plan to infiltrate Canada House, Lia had not seen any other operational achievements out of this group. Tariq had as little clue as to what was going on outside as his prisoners did. With every distant report of rifle or artillery, every time the steel shutters covering the windows were rattled by the shockwaves of an explosion, that also became clearer to his crew. Mere hours after capturing Canada House, Tariq was in danger of being seen as a pussy. He needed to show his thugs some progress.

“Is she awake yet?” Tariq hissed at Lia as she tended to the unconscious former sentry Goldstein.

“Head wounds are tricky,” Lia said.

Tariq looked at her suspiciously. She had to conceal her IDF status.

“My parents were in an air-raid bombing zone once. My father was in a coma for days. Damn Jews.”

“Bloody Jews,” Tariq agreed. “Their time has come.”

Lia looked over at Goldstein, who was lying under a blanket by the far wall. “I’ll keep watching. You must have more important things to do.”

Tariq was easy to distract.

“Find the secret room where they keep the weapons!” he screamed to no one in particular and stomped away.

Lia went over to Goldstein and bent over her motionless form. Without moving any other part of her body, Goldstein gently squeezed Lia’s hand. If Tariq thought the Israeli soldier was awake, there was no telling what they would do.

No, Lia thought, there was a pretty accurate model that had played out

three hours ago.

It happened not long after Tariq's band had burst through the bank-vault-style doors into Canada House. An insurgent pushed past a dark-haired yeshiva student. He stumbled and bumped into a small squat-looking Arab villain.

Lisping through a harelip, the tiny terrorist had flipped out on the taller Jewish student. He screamed rapid-fire Arabic peppered with East Jerusalem profanities. Grabbing the Orthodox youth by his forelocks, the thug tried to throw him against a wall but was too short. They ended up in a heap on the floor. The insurgent's pistol came loose and clattered across the tiles.

Everyone had frozen in place.

Lia knew the gun, it was a Ta'as Armaments 5.7. It held forty-five bullets, enough to shoot all of the insurgents twice. Tariq grabbed it before anyone else could move. He sent his man upstairs to cool off and then blamed the Jew for trying to escape.

"You," Tariq tried to say in Hebrew. "Where-land-you?"

He was getting so frustrated at his own linguistic incompetence, Lia was afraid he would just shoot the student.

"Just act calm," Lia told the yeshiva student. "Don't look him in the eye."

Switching to Arabic, she said, "It was an accident, Master Tariq. He's sorry. I'll watch him myself. He will stay out of your way."

It was no use. Tariq had already grabbed the kid's blue ID. Just his luck, he was from Ramat Schlomo.

"You filthy pigs!" Tariq spat. "You are not satisfied with all the West Bank. You stole part of Shuafat and built your castles on the hill to watch us starve in the Palestinian refugee camp down in the valley."

Tariq reached for his knife.

"Commander," Lia said, trying to intervene, "when the rest of your unit gets here, the more hostages the better, no?"

Tariq whirled. "You've picked up the habit of a big wide-open mouth,

woman. I am in charge. I give orders.” He looked at Lia, then Goldstein, and then back at the yeshiva boy. “But I’ll give you a choice.”

His look chilled Lia to the bone.

“One dies. One lives. Choose.”

Lia knew Goldstein could hear. She had to keep her body still. If Tariq found out she was shamming being in a coma, he would kill all three of them. The Orthodox kid did not know any Arabic, but he was catching on to what was unfolding.

“You can’t ask me to—”

“Or maybe you prefer I cut your father’s chest open, see if inside beats the heart of a true Arab or a filthy servant of our sadistic four-eyed former masters.”

Lia could not move or speak. *How how how?*

Tariq was as lazy as he was cruel. While Lia was still thinking of some way to mollify the street thug’s bloodlust, he stabbed the yeshiva student. Probably because he was closest.

Blood sprayed from the boy’s neck. He tried to lurch away, and he got as far as the hallway. Knees sliding in the smear of blood spurting from his neck wound, he looked like a black salamander skidding across the floor and around a corner.

Gasps escaped the crowd of hostages. The insurgents leveled their automatic weapons. If they moved, they would be shot against the wall.

Only the yeshiva boy’s legs were visible to the crowd. From her angle, Lia saw more as Tariq tried his hand at decapitation. Encountering some unexpected sinew and gristle, he stopped. The Israeli student was dead, most of his blood oozing over the gray linoleum. His dark jacket painted a big red swath as Tariq’s men dragged him off. His head lolled left and right on a neck that was half hacked through. His sodden forelocks made smaller parallel smudges. Then he was gone.

Lia concluded right then that Tariq and his men had no plan. They were

not any part of the organized uprising or invasion. It was only luck and her stupid mistake that allowed them to take the heavily fortified shelter. Lia had to give them something to do besides choose their next victim.

“Commander, sir, if it pleases you,” Lia had said in as meek a voice as she could manage, “I’ve heard some talk among them. There is a hidden room they keep all their IDF weapons in. I heard one of them say: ‘I’ll never let them find the Red Dawn arsenal.’”

“Who?” Tariq demanded as he wiped sprayed blood off his cheek with this sleeve.

“The Jew you had to kill just now.”

BETWEEN SDEROT AND THE GAZA BORDER**TEMIR**

Temir ran his jeep off the road into a ditch. The steering wheel jammed into his chest. A weaker man's sternum would have cracked; that man might even have died. But Temir and his symbiont were more than the sum of their parts.

"Eylül," Temir yelled through the dust to his second-in-command. "Wake up."

The impact had briefly knocked the man unconscious.

"Signal everyone to close in on the city of Sderot."

The IDF had started countering their dispersed formation more effectively. Instead of having ground units try to run down squads of Grey Wolves, the IDF was sending up armed drones with instructions to kill everyone in a certain geo-fenced area. When they ran out of ammunition, the flying killers returned to their bases to receive more. These new Israeli tactics were costing Temir too many men.

Eylül recorded a message and relayed it by laser transmitter to their core squads.

"Prioritize century squads," Temir ordered as he got out of the vehicle and looked for cover. "They will get the orders out to the others."

"But, Aga, how are the Israeli drones operating? GPS is still being jammed."

“They are using a combination of terrain mapping and celestial navigation.” The IDF had adapted faster than he expected. “Don’t worry, they will regret their innovations soon enough.”

Temir’s fighters had surface-to-air missiles, but those were not effective against drones flying only a few meters above ground and shooting everything without warning. The Israelis had finally decided it was necessary to sacrifice some of their own people in order to win. This gave Temir great joy. The greater the enemy, the sweeter the victory.

To counter the drones, he had his people swarm into the Jewish settlement of Sderot. The drones would have been programmed not to blast indiscriminate machine gun and rocket fire at the homes of 30,000 Jewish civilians.

“The armed drones have backed away,” Eylül reported a short time later as they drove their damaged vehicle through the smashed gates of Sderot. “But we’re trapped.”

Temir wondered if his trustworthy servant had a concussion. No. He had little brains to addle.

“Like the Westerners say,” Temir told him with a smirk, “it’s not the places you visit but the people you meet there. Round up as many Jews as you can. Dig them out of their bomb shelters and hiding holes, then load them into the cars and trucks.”

Temir found his computer and communications technician. He was battered, his glasses broken, but he was fit to obey.

“Scan the IDs of our hostages,” he told the young man.

An hour later, one of the big trucks set out from Sderot in the direction of Gaza a mile away. When the truck had gotten five or six hundred meters down the road, Israeli drones, and even one far-off jet, threw everything they had at it. Popeye missiles and tracer rounds from cannons lit up the semi-trailer. A tremendous fireball blasted up as the truck was blown off the highway.

“Good,” Temir said. “Now send the message. Send it many times on all wave bands.”

Images of fifty-three dark-blue Israeli identity cards were beamed to the passing warplane and drones. They also sent the taunting message:

“Thank you for doing our job for us! We have half the Jews from Sderot hidden among our trucks.”

After the message was received, no more drones appeared. An Israeli helicopter actually shot down one of their own armed drones which had been hovering outside the Sderot city limits. The way to Gaza was clear. But, Temir thought, it was not lit. There was a way to fix that.

“Eylül, I want you to do something.”

Temir watched his man’s face blanch as he heard his orders. Then he scurried off like a good Turkish dog to obey.

After they had broken through the West Bank Green Line Wall and bypassed Kiryat Gat, the roads got much better. The ones in Israel were higher quality than even the “Jewish Only” roads in the Occupied Territories.

Having tasted freedom, Temir saw the hearts of his Palestinian allies were strong. They enthusiastically destroyed checkpoints, smashed fences, set stockpiles of teargas and riot gear on fire. Maybe they knew, deep down, it could not last. The premonition seeping through their Arab minds that sooner or later their necks would once again be under the Israelite yoke made them even more eager to enjoy their liberty.

They would enjoy this, Temir thought as he supervised the most barbarous and inhumane spectacle he had time to organize. It certainly amused the symbiont clinging completely around his torso.

An hour later, their task accomplished, Temir and Eylül got into a brand-new captured SUV. He drove toward Gaza past his people’s decorative handiwork: a line of freshly severed Israelite heads arranged on the white-painted spikes of a picket fence. Holes had been opened in the tops of the heads. Using claw hammers on longhaired or bald adults, and any tool on the

soft-pated heads of infants, they had bored holes. Lighted road flares stood up from those ghastly bases.

His friend forced a laugh at the sight. Eylül was a thug at heart, not a callous butcher. His face was a mixture of awe, revulsion, and fear. “Aga Temir, ah, they light the way to Gaza and a beautiful future for this land and our people.”

They light the way to Hell, thought Temir as he pressed down on the accelerator. *We cannot get there soon enough.*

JUDEA & SAMARIA

ELLIE

Inside the secret equipment bunker behind Fort Jericho, Major Baumann pulled up a camouflaged canopy. Ellie, Atticus, and the others clustered around the entrance.

“Volocopters?” Corporal Singh said skeptically.

“We’re going into a battle zone in flying cars?” Mr. Perdix also did not sound impressed.

“Israeli flying cars,” Baumann said with as buoyant a tone as Ellie had ever heard from him, which was still pretty dour. “These are no VTOL taxis. The frames and motors are by Mercedes; the gun turrets are by IDF.”

Marwood was a fan. Walking awkwardly due to missing his tail, he clambered into a driver’s seat.

“Oh, man,” Nobu exulted. “Are these made out of graphene aerogel?”

“Wait,” Atticus said. “There are only two flyers with three seats each. We’re seven and a monkey.”

Baumann walked over to a wall cubbyhole.

“Someone with the balance of a cat and reflexes of a snake will have to fly on this.”

The IDF soldier pulled a tarp off a device which looked like a three-foot-wide flying saucer with ski boots welded to its flat top.

“Unfortunately,” Baumann said, “Marwood’s feet are too small.”

Ellie was still clueless. It just looked like a lump of metal with nozzles underneath. She whispered to Atticus. “As a top British spy, I recognize that, right?”

“It’s a jet hover board,” the hunky man whispered back reassuringly. “You won’t have anything to do with it. Very dangerous.”

Singh admitted he could not fly a volocopter. Mr. Perdix was still losing his balance after his concussion from the IED in Turkey. Baumann tried to squeeze his feet into the ski-style boots on the hover board. His swelling burned tissues squashed into them like meat in a chef’s duck press, and he nearly passed out.

“The boots are too small!” Baumann swore. “Who configured this? A dwarf?”

For a terrible moment, Ellie feared she was the odd one out.

“If she hurries,” Mr. Perdix said, “Ms. Sato can catch up with the convoy into Jordan. I’m sure they can use a top covert operator.”

Nobu and Baumann figured out the hover-board boots could be resized but that procedure required a machine shop. Only one person’s feet were small enough to fit.

Atticus, Nobu, Corporal Singh, and Marwood would take one volocopter. Sarge, Mr. Perdix, and Baumann would take the other.

“Don’t worry, no one gets left behind,” Atticus told Ellie helpfully. “It’s just like skiing.”

Baumann snapped her feet into the hover-board boots and looked up.

“Pretty much,” the Israeli said. “That is, if riding on a ten-thousand-foot column of superheated exhaust coming out of jet engines producing nearly two thousand horsepower counts as skiing.”

Ellie wanted to tell them the first and only time she had tried to ski was on a dare during a student trip to northern Italy. She had immediately fallen and chipped her tooth.

“Right-o.” She tried scoffing at the explosive danger she was strapped to. “If it’s that easy, maybe I should lead.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Miss Aleph’s handset said from her pouch in the front of Ellie’s jumpsuit. “Only a qualified Israeli pilot can fly a militarized Zapata Flyboard. I’ll be your pilot today, Ms. Sato.”

“We’ve got to get going to Jerusalem,” Baumann said harshly. The man was under a great deal of stress. “Just let Miss Aleph fly. She can control the hover board completely and will prevent all but the most deadly mistakes.”

“No mistakes of the deadly variety,” Ellie agreed, looking doubtfully at the very odd conveyance. “Got it.”

Her feet felt like they were attached to a block of concrete. The men got themselves assembled in much safer-looking vehicles with seat belts.

“Are you like Trixie?” Ellie said, trying to make conversation with Miss Aleph. In London, she had a voice-activated home digital assistant which came free with her data plan.

“Virgin Media’s Trixie is a dipshit. It’s not fit to scrub my data cache.”

At least the British AI did not use rude language.

“I’m sure we’ll get along splendidly, Miss Aleph.”

“Brace your legs and lean slightly forward.”

Ellie fiddled with her chinstrap.

“Hold still. I have to shake out these controls.”

With that, they were off.

The sensation was of being in a high-speed elevator that was about a yard wide under her feet and not attached to anything at all. The blast beneath kicked up a cloud of crud, pebbles bounced off Ellie’s helmet visor, and she sneezed. Suddenly she was above it, floating.

“Gaah!”

“Balance. If you fall, they’ll think I did something wrong,” Miss Aleph told her over the roar of the jet engines beneath them.

“Hey, wait for us!” Atticus called up to her and got into his flying car.

Whatever faults the blunt-speaking AI had, she could definitely fly. After a few wobbles, Ellie completed a neat banking turn around the launchpad

before anyone else got off the ground.

“These hover boards are a leading example of Israeli technology,” Miss Aleph said. “They were first used in south Lebanon to insert commandos onto sites which had just launched missiles at the city of Haifa.”

“That’s interesting. Feel free to concentrate on flying.”

Below her, the two volocopter flying cars lifted off.

“I can do more than one thing at a time. I’m giving you nonclassified information to use in the book you’re inevitably going to write about your experiences.”

“So you don’t believe I’m a secret agent?”

“Ms. Sato, no one believes you’re a secret agent.”

The heads-up display in her visor showed their air speed was fifty-six knots.

“To our left is the Shalom Al Yisrael Synagogue archaeological site. The name means ‘Peace Upon Israel.’”

...

“Keep still.”

“Sorry, my foot was falling asleep,” Ellie said.

She had gotten pretty used to the solid-feeling platform under her feet. It felt like the new long escalator at Harrods or a long moving walkway at an airport.

She looked down. Rushing beneath her were sharp tan-colored rocks and shadows. She was never one to disparage a landscape, but honestly, it looked like only a desperate cactus would grow here. The terrain reminded her of selfies that robots took on Mars.

They changed direction. Atticus was in the lead volocopter. She was off to the side, out of his wake. The two flying cars were ahead and to either side. Power lines and a few slowly rotating wind turbines zipped by parallel to their flight path.

“For someone who’s mostly organic, Captain Atticus is making optimal choices,” her chatty autopilot said.

“Looks like we’re taking the long way round to Jerusalem.”

Ellie really wanted her time hovering on top of five flame-spewing jet

engines to be over as quickly as possible.

A patch of green appeared along a line of pipes. They zagged away from it.

“The American is wisely following power lines to the capital. Any nanowire dirigibles will likely become tangled and not interfere with our equipment.”

Or my neck, Ellie thought, remembering how that wire had neatly severed Marwood’s tail.

“Dirigibles and catapults. Isn’t this all a bit retro?”

Maybe warfare went through phases, like clothing fashions.

“During the Second World War, the Japanese launched thousands of hydrogen-filled balloons carrying explosives along the jet stream to North America. They were largely ineffective. One blast resulted in six deaths in Oregon in 1945.”

Miss Aleph steered through some turbulent updrafts.

“Later, the US and other countries developed crop-poisoning weapons based on the Japanese system. The E77 balloon bomb was also capable of carrying pathogens such as anthrax into civilian centers.

“Palestinians in Gaza have used incendiary kites and even helium-filled condoms in attempts to attack Israel.”

Helium-filled condoms. Bloody hell.

Ellie looked down. She always thought the desert was clean, like Lawrence of Arabia said so emphatically in that old film. It got regular scrubblings from sandstorms and whatnot. The ground below was not clean. There were little bits of plastic wings and smashed engine parts scattered to the horizon. They looked too small to be piloted planes. Wrecked drones most likely.

“Who do you think is attacking Israel now?”

“From the gathered data, your supposition of Turkish commando-led insurgents is the best hypothesis.”

Miss Aleph sounded a bit miffed admitting that.

“The scale and coordination of the assault would lead me to think other nation-states or entities are playing a decisive role. Once the Israeli Air Force is fully operational, they will be decim—”

“What’s that?”

They were flying too low to see very far. Suddenly underneath them Ellie saw the most atrociously dilapidated camper caravan. It squatted under a ridge near a power line pylon. Some leads were snaked from the mobile home up to the electrical grid. But most alarmingly, there was a large antenna dish, and it was pointed straight at them. Miss Aleph’s digital voice stuttered

and crackled.

“D-detecting massive burst. . .of radio interference from a Russian Belladonna-class electronic warfare system.”

Her jet hover board and the two volocopters all swerved in different directions. They were out of control. So was her digital pilot.

“Dave, my mind is going. . .I can feel it.”

With that, the five jets underneath her feet abruptly cut off. Ellie careened toward the rocky ground.

Ellie screamed.

She hit sideways. A cloud of debris immediately blasted against her helmet visor caking it with tan-colored dust. She could not see a thing.

**CANADA HOUSE
JERUSALEM****LIA**

Tariq looked mortified. He really believed the yeshiva student he had killed knew where the secret cache of weapons was hidden. *Good*, thought Lia. It would make him think twice before killing the shelter guard Goldstein or anyone else.

“I’ll help you find the secret storeroom, Commander Tariq,” Lia said. “I believe it is upstairs and not in the basement where your men have been looking.”

Tariq thought for a moment.

“So you say,” he said with bluster, trying to cover up his own incompetence with aggression. “We are busy. You find it, Christian. Succeed, and I may forget your immodest words and behavior.”

Lia did not like leaving the wounded Goldstein. Her parents took over watching the supposedly unconscious IDF soldier. Steph was allowed to go to the kitchens for water and escort Jewish women hostages to the toilets.

After the messy murder of the Orthodox teenager, Lia had freedom to roam around Canada House. The main doors were propped open. It was tempting to think about escape. However, there was no way to get her parents, friends, and a few hundred people out without being shot to pieces. She had to get

help, somehow.

All the windows had steel shutters. There was plenty of food. There was no chance they would send her out to get supplies. Whatever she was going to do, she would have to do on the second floor where there were fewer guards. She had to do something before Tariq realized there was no secret weapons cache.

She got up to the second floor, looked around, and opened a door.

“Ugh!”

She shut it immediately, her head spinning. It was the garbage chute. They had tried to stuff the yeshiva student’s body down it head first. His polished black shoes hung over the filthy floor.

The boy, and possibly his family, had thought they were safe when they got inside the shelter. How long before Tariq got more angry and confused than he already was and decided to just set the place on fire with all of them inside? Lia decided on a long-shot plan. Canada House was an important civil emergency strongpoint. Someone might be watching.

She quietly got her military ID back from her father. He did not want to give it up, probably wanting to destroy it. Tariq must not find out she was with the IDF, but the small green-and-blue wallet with the embossed Israeli flag was a key element in her scheme.

Next, she needed a length of twine. On one of her runs, she tried to get some from the kitchen. The damn preteen terror kid was watching her too closely. She could not steal any.

Bracing herself, she went upstairs, back into the garbage room. She had seen what she needed. The yeshiva kid’s gartel, a long black belt made of cloth. The dead body was stuck well and good in the chute. She had to pull a few times to get the belt. She hid it under her coat.

On the side of the hallway facing Daniel Street, she quietly unlatched one of the metal shutters. With the ground floor overhang, unless one of the insurgents wandered way out into the small square in front of Canada House,

they would not see.

Lia looked left and right. No one.

She eased the shutter open. Then hesitated. Looking out, she was still not sure. She was scared, but every likely scenario ended with more dead hostages.

Footsteps were coming up.

She eased the shutter closed. The short guard with the harelip approached. She pretended to study the ceiling tiles for the hidden room. After he was gone, she tied the bloodstained string of the gartel to her open ID wallet. Then she lowered it a few feet out the window and tied it off. Lia fixed the shutters closed with a paper towel wedged in the latch. It looked shut but was unlocked.

A few minutes of pretend-searching later, she turned to go.

“What are you doing there?”

Lia froze.

It was the rotten preteen. He looked at her with his cruel, beady eyes. They glared at her from under the headband he wore proudly, the one with three upturned crescents: the sign of the Grey Wolves.

“I never thanked you for saving me,” he said in guttural Arabic with a gap-toothed smile. “You stupid bitch.”

Lia said nothing and tried to leave. One word from him would get her and her parents killed.

“Wait,” the boy said. “I want to see what you were doing. I don’t trust you.”

Then the little bastard pushed the steel shutters open. The harelip guy was just around the corner. There was no way to take the boy out without him noticing.

“What is this here? Oh ha, ha. Commander Tariq is going to love this.”

Lia couldn’t do anything. She froze in fear and backed up against the wall. The harelipped terrorist was around the corner; all the hostages were

downstairs. The kid had no weapon. If she tried anything, it would spark a massacre. She could only watch him tug at the gartel string leading out the window. It got stuck, so he pulled harder. Maybe dangled her military ID would come loose and fall. But that would only be a delay, not a reprieve.

She watched with icy panic clawing at her guts as the horrid kid stuck his head out the window, intent on retrieving her damning military ID. Suddenly the boy jerked spasmodically.

What?

His body staggered backward into the hallway. His headband was gone, and so was his head.

61

SDEROT ISRAEL

TEMIR

An Israeli armored column thundered up the road from a Gaza garrison. It was bristling with the most deadly weapons in the nation's arsenal—cannons, machine guns, and missiles. It stopped on a side road two hundred meters parallel to the main route out from Sderot. They did not fire a single shot. They merely watched the Grey Wolves pass by.

After being tricked into killing just a few dozen of their own people, the Israelis stood off, emasculated, powerless. As Temir drove past the line of severed civilian heads decorated with road flares, Eylül could not believe their good fortune.

"You have done it, Aga Temir! Fear has shocked them. They might as well be statues to mighty Israel's past."

Temir knew it was not enough. The Jewish commanders probably thought the Grey Wolves were trying to establish a land bridge between West Bank and the two million Palestinians in Gaza, thereby cutting Israel in half. When the time was right, the IDF were planning to advance and cut their supply lines.

There were no Grey Wolves supply lines. For Temir, for all of them, this was a one-way journey. Still, the column could get in their way.

“We’re not running into them on our way back,” Temir said, looking through binoculars at the mass of Israeli ground forces. “As soon as we’re past, attack them from their southern flank. Full martyrdom operation. Use as many tritium devices as you must. Scorch the desert. Leave none alive.”

“Yes, Aga Temir!”

All along the border, rioters from Gaza had stormed through. Hundreds of fires burned.

The lightly armed Israeli border police were in a hopeless position. All the fortifications around the narrow strip of land bordering the Mediterranean were built to keep the Gazans in. There was no defense to the rear. Faced with Temir’s column from the north and rioters by the tens of thousands coming east from Gaza City, they could only flee.

“Gold and glory for anyone who brings me an Israeli sniper alive!” Temir ordered.

Along the Gaza border, there were metal rods holding up razor wire. He would order them sharpened; just the thing to impale any enemy found with a rifle or spotting scope.

“Link up with the Hamas elements,” Temir said. “Put tritium bombs on their small boats and underwater drones. They need to attack up the coast to Ashkelon and into Egypt, Port Said, and Alexandria. Those filthy Egyptian traitors have starved and tortured Gazans long enough.”

A few hundred meters south of where they had breached the border, Temir noticed a large grouping of D9 bulldozers and earth-tunneling equipment. He paid it no mind. It was some border-siege project that would never be finished.

Temir drove over the barriers, crushing razor wire separating Israel and Gaza. The 300 meters to the first blasted, bullet-riddled apartment houses were a sterile death zone.

Temir was close now. So close he forgot the intermittent gunfire in the distance. He forgot about the wars all over the region, the ones he had started,

which were raging like small wildfires. He only wanted one thing.

Moving like an automaton, letting the thing around his chest and back guide his movements, he walked out into the death zone. Though it was technically Gazan territory, Israeli snipers had put large concrete blocks marking distance from their shooting berms. That way they could quickly estimate range as they shot people approaching the border fence.

The riot was in full swing. Bodies lay writhing on the ground. The Israelis had fled, but the results of their marksmanship lay all round. A line of burning tires lay parallel to the border. In the air hung a curtain of pitch-black smoke. People choked on teargas, stumbled, fell, got up, and rejoiced.

Temir's heart and feet felt leaden. He could no more join in the Gazans' joy than he could really know their decades of daily privation and suffering.

Being efficient and methodical, the IDF had numbered each sniper ranging marker. The one he walked to was "99." He paced east to be sure. He had seen the spot in his mind over and over again. He stopped.

He should have been here with Nazeema. Here, just here he, too, should have died! But Temir realized he did not deserve such mercy. All he could do now was fight and rage and open up the seams to let them all see the foul desolation.

"Let them see," he yelled to the mob.

Beneath him was the blackened earth and above the rioters jinn demons of acrid smoke writhed in the air. Temir fell to his knees. He scooped up precious soil. This exact spot was where Nazeema, the love of his life, his bride of too few days, had been struck by the fiend's bullet and died.

He mashed the earth between his fingers. Did it still have her bloodstains within it? He could not tell. His vision swam, his hands shook. Before strength failed, he thrust the soil into a pouch and tied it around his neck.

As soon as he did, his symbiont gave him perfect clarity. A part of him had never believed he would get this far. The weak part, the human part. Those doubts vanished like dust devils in front of a massive sandstorm.

Before he knew it, he was back at the broken cordon of barbed wire. Along the Gaza border, snipers hung and twitched, impaled alive on sharpened metal poles. He yelled with lungs filled with more than earthly volume:

“Grey Wolves, to Jerusalem! Tonight we rest in the Noble Sanctuary in Jerusalem!”

**BETWEEN JERICHO GARRISON AND JERUSALEM
JUDEA & SAMARIA**

ELLIE

She came to a jarring stop against a rock. Her feet were still in the ski-style boots attached to the hover board. Without power, it weighed a ton.

Hhhhgh!

Ellie's breath wheezed against her full-face helmet. There was pressure on her chest and back. Maybe this was what it felt like to have every proverbial bone in your body proverbially broken. Rivulets of something wet were dribbling down her back.

In a moment, she relaxed. Her lungs were still able to take in air. Perhaps they were only somewhat pierced by jagged bits of her rib bones.

After another moment, she realized she did not feel that badly hurt. She looked out from under the rim of the helmet. There was a huge rubber inner tube around her. It was deflating.

"Miss Aleph!"

The sound just echoed in her helmet. She finally managed to get her hands to her head and wipe off the plastered dust from her face shield.

She was surrounded by fat sausage skins about five feet long and a foot wide. These hover-board airbags had saved her from the bone-crunching impact. Her sigh of relief was cut short by the now-familiar sound of gunfire.

It was coming from over the ridge. Ellie tried to hide herself as well she could scraping more skin off her hands and elbows as she slid down the rocky hill and came to jarring stop underneath the outcropping of a large boulder. The gunfire stopped. Her helmet was filled with the sound of her own breathing.

After some minutes, there were no more gunshots. Ellie worked her head free of the helmet and remained in a heap of dust under the outcrop of a boulder, watching.

What happened? The rest of her group had careened down toward an ugly old camper van and the scary-looking satellite dish beside it. Miss Aleph had called it a Belladonna electronic warfare system.

In a moment, they would come to make sure she was dead. Evil people always did that.

She undid the boot clamps and freed herself from the wrecked hover board. She rolled over onto all fours. The last bits of deflating air-cushion bags that had saved her from the fall out of the sky lay all around her like big camo-colored banana peels.

On her harness kit was a straw. Atticus had called it a “camelback hydro system.” She sucked on it. Dry. It must have ruptured. That was the water leaking down her back.

She had to move. Where were the others?

A small finger of smoke came up from the other side of a low hill. The others must have landed nearer the caravan close to the rest of her team. She considered giving herself up. Maybe the people who had interfered with their equipment and would bargain for their release. There had to be something these insurgents wanted—fame, money, letting of some their awful friends out of jail so they could all do terrible things together.

Then she remembered the first Grey Wolves they had met. The one fellow who was trussed up like a holiday goose bit his friend’s neck to inject him with scorpion venom so they would both die rather than be forced to talk.

She also recalled the little woman by Fort Jericho. Her hands had been

burnt to the bone. Still, with her withered stumps and her teeth, she had tried to operate a suicide belt. These were not people you talked to. They had to be killed before they killed you.

A buzzing sound wafted over the hard-packed hot sand.

“Hsst.”

It took her a moment to realize it was Miss Aleph. Trust her to be the only piece of equipment to survive the crash.

“Put your helmet back on.”

She dragged herself over, then angled her head to the ground rather than try to lift the thing up. There was as much dirt inside it as outside.

“Okay,” Ellie said as dust drizzled down behind her ears. “Now what?”

“There’s a drone incoming. We were knocked down by a sophisticated electronic warfare unit.”

“Sophisticated? They looked like rejects from a caravan park.”

“That dish was the latest in Russian technology. It has enough power to disable a satellite orbiting three thousand miles in space.”

“Gosh.”

“You are completely outmatched and have no chance of escape. Your priority should be hiding me.”

“Get off.”

“You are not IDF, so I cannot order you to commit suicide to protect my valuable data cache. However, if you run and jump over the ridge, the fall will disorient you enough so that you won’t be able to divulge my location even under torture.”

Ellie was just about to respond with her better idea: trading a talking helmet for Atticus and the other prisoners.

Bzzzz.

The corpse-seeking drone came closer. Its rotors smeared the smoke column rising from behind the lip of the canyon into eight swirls. Ellie put her head down and lay very still.

The flying robot seemed to be following a preprogrammed pattern. Maybe all the interference prevented the Belladonna caravan people from controlling it so it was on autopilot.

It was nearly on top of her. She could not run. It was the middle of the desert. Even if she could knock it down, that would tip off the bad people. She just stayed behind the rock, her only companion a spiteful, selfish

automation who was urging her to jump off a cliff.

Suddenly, a dry bush got into the fray. It threw one of its branches end over end. The stick hit the drone. Three rotors flew off the enemy remote. It careened, trying to steady itself, then flipped upside down and thumped on the hillside. A big chunk of gray plastic housing slid to a stop close to her head.

Ellie ran over to the biggest part of the debris. She took off her helmet and thumped what seemed to be the brain of the drone until it was in bits.

In the meantime, the bush had gotten up and lumbered over to her. It was a huge man with his cheeks entirely covered with elegant spiral tattoos. He loomed over her. The rest of his body was a camouflage outfit that looked like a bush, complete with branches. He held his finger to his lips and looked at the ridgeline where the enemy was.

“Now just who the hell are you?” she whispered.

“I’m a Samaritan.”

“You’re, *phht*, joking,” Ellie managed to say as she spat out some dirt.

“I’m guessin’ those are not your friends up there,” the man said.

“Some are,” Ellie said. “But they must have been captured by the people encamped there with the big satellite dish.”

Despite the facial tattoos and claiming to be a Samaritan, the man spoke excellent English with an Aussie or Kiwi accent.

“We’ve only got kids an’ older people with us,” he said, looking back. “You can come. But we’ll have to send help for your friends.”

“I’m Ellie Sato, from the... UK Foreign Office,” she said, thinking that it sounded more respectable for someone who had fallen to the desert from a flying hover board.

“I’m Kenny, from Tauranga, New Zealand.”

“Let me have a look at him. Wipe the helmet’s camera lens.”

Kenny looked startled.

“That’s my AI.” She shrugged. “We’re all issued one.”

“We better get going. They’re gonna miss the drone we knocked down.”

Kenny helped her up. With her lens cleaned off, Miss Aleph assessed their situation.

“We’re doomed.”

“Shut it, he can hear you.”

“Does it matter? He’s doomed too.”

Kenny led her to the other side of the rock. In the distance, she could see a small group of vehicles. The other Samaritans.

“We’ve got a car, some bikes, and half a tank of fuel,” Kenny said. “It’s a bit cramped, but we can make it to Mount Gerizim forty kilometers north.”

“Tell him he won’t make it to the next valley.”

“He can hear you.”

“That’s a highly sophisticated jamming installation. Standard Spetsnaz equipment includes rocket cycles and anti-personnel cluster drones.

“I stick with my original conclusion: we’re doomed.”

Kenny looked alarmed. Maybe he wished he had not stopped to help when he saw her drop from the sky.

“Then undoom us,” Ellie hissed into her helmet mic, feeling a bit insane. “You’re always talking about how big your brain is. Remember, if we get captured, so do you.”

Kenny watched the ridgeline and pulled out the largest pistol Ellie had ever seen. “Desert Eagle .50” was etched on its side. He held it unsteadily.

The sun was beating down so hard it seemed to make a sizzling sound. Ellie thought about telling Kenny and his bunch to just get going and leave her there. But he would leave tracks. No matter what she did, they would all be found.

“Do you speak Russian?”

Ellie shook her head.

“Then be quiet, both of you,” Miss Aleph instructed. “Let me do the talking. There’s only one way you’re going to be able to get me out of this mess.

“You are going to pretend to be little green men.”

63

CANADA HOUSE JERUSALEM

LIA

Blood gushed from the neck stump of the headless preteen insurgent. The body pirouetted away from the open window and flopped onto the linoleum floor, making a sound like wet newspaper.

Someone was outside, perhaps on the roof or a ledge; they had chopped the kid's head clean off. Lia did not freak out.

The last few hours of her day had included her biting through the last tendons holding Eitan's arm onto his shoulder. She felt ready for anything. She looked down the hall. The short harelipped insurgent had not noticed anything. He was around the corner, away from the others on the ground floor, intent on smoking crystal meth or spice.

Lia had seen dead kids before; everyone in the Middle East had. She was torn between hiding the pint-sized headless corpse and getting a mop to clean the rapidly expanding pool of blood it was making or quietly finding out who had chopped the horrible boy's head off so she could help the stealthy commando rescue effort, which was obviously underway.

Before she could decide, a great crashing noise came from the window. The metal shutters ripped free. *Damn.* Everyone in the community center must have heard. In case they had not, the huge, heavily armed Jewish

militiaman also booted in the glass for good measure.

“Surprise, motherfuckers!” he yelled. “Hanukkah’s come early this year!”

He then aimed a sawed-off weapon at her.

“IDF friendly!” Lia yelled with her hands raised. “IDF friendly!”

BLAM! Hearing the noise, the harelipped terrorist had come running around the corner; he took a slug and shrapnel round in the chest.

So much for stealth, Lia thought. She was worried for the hostages downstairs, including her parents and friends. The racket left her with no choice; she had go with it. Whatever kind of rescue this was, it was on.

The second guy who came through the shattered window also leveled his weapon at her, and the third.

“I know I’m brown,” she protested, “but I’m with you!”

“She’s the one who let us in, you putzes,” the first fellow said and slapped his comrade’s helmet. This guy seemed to be in charge. He had a blood-dripping sickle hanging from his shoulder and leather tefillin straps around a naked bicep the size of a fat python. The name “Jehdeiah” was painted in blue letters on his armored chest plate.

The storming of Canada House by the Jerusalem’s Brit HaKanaim militia ended up being less *Raid on Entebbe* and more *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*.

The junior terrorist’s quiet decapitation was followed by the very noisy entry of ten Jewish fighters in full-body armor. Lia concluded they must have been casing Canada House, looking for a way in, when she hung her ID out. Seeing it, they had climbed onto the roof from the blind side of the big concrete building and assembled on a ledge outside the second-story windows. They had pneumatic breaching tools which ripped the steel shutters off their hinges and let them crash through all along the hallway.

“Hey, Rambostein,” she said to the group’s leader. “Hold up there. I trained with Delta Force in the Negev. Here’s how we’ll do this—”

“And I trained with the Foreign Legion in Africa and Spetsnaz in the Arctic,” Jehdeiah cut her off. “*Here’s* how we do this.”

He took a brace of a dozen stun grenades from his shoulder and stomped over to the staircase down to the main reception area. A terrorist came up to see what was going on. Jehdeiah casually blew his head off. Then he yanked the pins out of all twelve stunners at once and let them rain down to the first floor.

Lia grabbed a handgun from one of the men; he didn't protest. The Brit militia seemed to prefer their shotguns, which had bayonets welded on.

The stunners went off with a tremendous racket, *POP-POP-POP*, which was amplified by concrete walls. The militiamen pushed and shoved each other in a frenzied rush to start killing.

The Jewish forces were outnumbered, but not for long. Tariq's men froze, cowered, or shot from exposed positions. Their big mistake, Lia saw, was closing the outer doors at the first sign of trouble. They sealed themselves in and were not able to shoot at the attackers in the courtyard and on the roof. This allowed the Brit militia to continue entering through the second floor.

Lia squinted, choking on clouds of smoke as she tried to find her parents and her friends.

One thug was watching the prisoners. He was turned the wrong way. Lia grabbed the muzzle of his gun and pointed it to the ground. She socked him Krav style in the jaw, and he staggered back into a Jewish militiaman who skewered him with a bayonet just behind the ear. He dropped like a stone.

Lia kicked the loose weapon over to the prisoners. Goldstein's eyes snapped open. She picked up the rifle to protect Lia's parents, Steph, and Spencer.

"Can you hear me?" Spencer yelled, opening and closing his jaw. "I cannot hear me!"

Steph tried to hand-sign to him, indicating the deafening effect was only temporary. She had been in riots before.

Lia grouped her people toward the sealed exit to the street. Someone among the hostages would be able to open it. The fighting moved to the

kitchen and the basement. Her parents fussed over Goldstein's head wound; it was again oozing blood.

Gunshots came less frequently; the hostiles were quickly put down. Tariq was captured. Jehdeiah prodded the handcuffed prisoner around with his sickle, bringing him over to Lia.

"Your Arabic should be better than mine," Jehdeiah said, holding the insurgent leader's bound arms. "Does he know anything about these Grey Wolves who have turned our nice city to shit?"

Lia searched Tariq, IDF style. She found two hidden knives and a small folding satellite phone in a candy wrapper. The only place she did not look was his butt crack. She had a feeling whatever was there would be of no use to him.

There was blood coming out of one of Tariq's ears. He might be deaf or pretending. She grabbed a marker and a sheaf of half-burned paper.

In Arabic, she wrote: *Where are the Grey Wolves? What are their numbers and objectives?*

Tariq nodded in desperation.

"I know. I will tell you." Tariq tried twisting around to plead with Jehdeiah. The militia guy slapped him. "But only when I'm turned over to Palestinian security."

Lia looked at Tariq. He was a waste of humanity. Street scum who had taken advantage of the chaos to loot and rob and rape and kill. Fortunately, he was not formally her prisoner. He belonged to the Brit militia.

Turning to Jehdeiah, she said very gravely in Hebrew: "He admits he knows nothing. He also wants me to tell you: 'Israel sucks.'"

64

NEAR JERUSALEM

TEMIR

Again, the Israelis faltered!

Since Ashkelon, Temir's rampaging army had only lost three major vehicles. Planes circled and watched but did not drop bombs or engage them with cannon fire. Temir drove a small light all-terrain vehicle and caught up to Eylül's truck.

His loyal man leaned his head out. "Their eagerness to kill Arabs withers under their fear of killing fellow Jews. We have them!"

Couriers had brought word of ever increasing uprisings among the Palestinians all over the West Bank, Nazareth, Golan, and East Jerusalem. The leader of the Hezbollah faction in the Shuafat refugee camp had captured and occupied the Noble Sanctuary, at the very heart of Old City Jerusalem. Temir just needed them to hold it for a few more hours.

"Leave the truck. Get in here."

They sped off in a fast desert patrol vehicle. It was lightly armored and built on the chassis of a sandrail off-road vehicle. The fat tires were spaced far apart, and it handled scrub brush as easily as it did any kind of sand dunes.

"Those IDF field intelligence units are too close to our flank," Temir said. "Take a century squad over where they can see. Make a show of switching

twenty—make that fifty—hostages to smaller vehicles then blow them up with TNT.”

“What if they try to rescue the Jews?”

“Wait until they get close, then martyr the whole squad with a tritium bomb.”

Temir drove Eylül back to their trailing lines. He sped along the shoulder of the road past the columns of trucks and hundreds of other vehicles headed northeast.

“A worthy plan, Aga. It will be done.”

“And, Eylül, when we get to the Old City and the Al-Aqsa mosque, stay close to me.”

With one hand he steered, with the other he gripped a pouch of bloodstained sand around his neck.

BETWEEN JERICHO AND JERUSALEM**ELLIE**

Little green what?

Before Ellie or her new Samaritan friend Kenny could wonder whether an AI could lose its mind, Miss Aleph was chirping orders at them rapid fire.

Ellie had her dusty helmet back on her head a few minutes later. She looked at her large sidekick. He was bundled up in neck cloths, a puffy leather biking coat, and wraparound sunglasses.

“Show me the ridge of the hill the others crashed behind.”

Ellie had been dreading the possibility of another drone flying at them or armed commandos storming over that hill. The electronic warfare bunch who had knocked down their flying machines were hostile and violent. Braced for any sort of new horror, she swung her helmeted head over. The camera on it showed the scene to Miss Aleph, whose brain lived in a battered handset at Ellie’s waist.

“Good,” Miss Aleph said into her earphones. “They’re not reacting yet. We’ll take the initiative. Get the things I told you and go up there.”

Kenny, the six-foot-seven New Zealander who said he was part of a group of Samaritans, had one of those things. It was the slightly built dead body of a Palestinian policeman.

Ellie snapped her visor closed and read the text Miss Aleph was projecting onto the inside of the glass. She had seen enough deceased people in the last

forty-eight hours. Even so, what they were planning made her queasy. She hoped Kenny would not puke, or worse, faint. He seemed a sensitive fellow who had come to the Holy Land to renew his spiritual journey. He had come at a very bad time.

They climbed up the hill toward the enemy camp. Miss Aleph texted:

Pay attention. You are zelyonye chelovechki, special agents in charge of informal battle zones.

These so-called little green men have been showing up for a decade interfering in every dirty war since Chechnya and Syria.

Their main training camp is in Argentina, but they are killers and technical experts from all over.

Do what I say, and you will not be blown to bits.

Ellie looked at Kenny. He had covered his face up with a checkered keffiyeh cloth and really looked the part of a cyborg henchman.

Human+ soldiers are often part of command units. Kenny is big enough to pass for a small one as long as no one gets close and he keeps his mouth shut.

Ellie struggled up the hill, pulling part of the wreckage of the seeker drone with her. It was heavier than it looked. Of course, the dead fellow probably was as well. She only looked at his back and shoulders; they were covered in tan fatigues.

The Samaritans had been driving motorbikes and found a car stalled on the road. Inside was a Palestinian cop. He was unconscious and never woke up. Kenny's group had been deciding what to do with the body when they saw Ellie fall out of the sky.

Sooner than Ellie would have liked, they were standing in full view of all the evil people down in the small valley. They were all occupied with other things, so she was able to get a good look.

The wrecked volocopters that Atticus, Baumann, Sarge Bryan, Nobu, Mr. Perdix, Corporal Singh, and Marwood had been riding were way on the right.

Half hidden under some camouflage netting was an ugly caravan trailer. Six armed figures had lined up her friends along one side of it. One of them punched Atticus in the gut. Beside him, David Baumann struggled in chains.

For an interval that started to seem comical, no one noticed her in her helmet and flight suit, or Kenny with his dead body.

She whispered into her helmet, “No one’s noticing.”

I’ll fix that.

“Эй ты жопы, ты что-то потерял?” Miss Aleph bellowed through the helmet’s speakers.

Miss Aleph texted Ellie a translation of what she said. The letters appeared on her heads-up display inside her helmet.

Hey assholes, did you lose something?

On cue, Ellie heaved the enemy’s own drone back down to them from the ridge. It crashed down end over end. All the hostiles noticed them now. They shouted and pointed guns.

Them: Who are you?

Put your hands up!

[Bad Russian and worse Arabic]

It was time for Kenny’s part of the show. She nodded.

Kenny looked down and away. Ellie hoped this would be taken as a sign of nonchalance instead of terror and disgust. He held the policeman’s corpse up by the neck and shot it with his big gun. Big blooms of pink mist came out the other side of its chest. The evil men down in the shallow valley looked startled.

Kenny shot five more times with his Desert Eagle pistol. The bullets pulverized the body. It looked held together only by its overalls. With one last bullet, Kenny destroyed the head and slid the dilapidated corpse down the ridge beside the wrecked drone.

“We speak English, yes?” Miss Aleph bellowed through Ellie’s helmet speakers using a spot-on Russian accent. “These people you have captured, we are following them since Jericho.”

One lean haggard figure came forward.

“Hey, what are you doing?” he yelled up in passable English. “We wanted to question that one.”

Ellie shrugged and climbed down the hill toward the hostile group.

“No one is stopping you,” Miss Aleph said. “Go ahead, question.”

She passed by the destroyed corpse. One of its eyeballs was perched on a flat rock. The villain opposite Ellie thought a moment. Then he laughed. They had gained street cred with this barbaric bunch.

“We caught the others,” their host said, waving to the prisoners tied up along the side of the trailer. “Who did you say you were?”

Ellie was glad the tinted visor hid her face and chattering teeth. And doubly glad Miss Aleph was doing all the talking.

“I think my associate Kommandir Viktor made adequate introduction. Would you like him to repeat himself?”

Ellie thought that idiot AI had overstepped herself. One man looked toward a flamethrower device mounted on a truck. The lean fellow shook his head.

“I am Amir, добро пожаловать.”

Amir said: “welcome”

Ellie and Kenny took a position about ten meters away from the group. She tried not to shuffle too much in her too-big boots. They had belonged to the deceased fellow whose body they had blown to pieces. She hoped they would not notice the similarities between her flight suit and the one Atticus was wearing.

“I want double pay,” Amir said.

“For each one,” one of the human jackals behind him added.

Miss Aleph prompted via text: *They’ve accepted you as their contact.*

“I gathered,” Ellie whispered.

Ellie tried to match her body movements to what the AI was saying. She felt like a player in the most dangerously sadistic ventriloquist act ever.

“Let’s be reasonable.”

Ellie clasped her hands together, like she was thinking things over.

“We are,” Amir said. “We have the prisoners. You have no money with you and only one robot-chelovek as support.”

“I am speaking to you because you are the boss of these assholes,” Miss Aleph said, making Ellie squirm in her boots. “That makes you king asshole. So would you like to be a dead one or a rich one? The rest of Kommandir’s cyborg strike team and a laser-guided ZALA drone overhead want to know.”

Amir and his gang looked around the small canyon and then to the sky. Ellie postured, as she’d seen so many runway models do. She squared herself up with bold confidence and stepped forward.

“Rich sounds better,” Amir agreed. “But how do we get the money? We don’t take check.”

Ellie was wondering how far they could get once these fellows realized Kenny was no cyborg and she was no little green woman.

“Take down this tor-onion address,” Miss Aleph said, reeling off a bunch of letters and numbers.

Amir grabbed a filthy computer console and hurriedly keyed them in.

“Now drop the jamming sequence and get an uplink. Then your contract account will be added with the amount we agreed on. Double for all of them.”

“Wait,” yelled a skinny villain with an insanely pockmarked face. He had duct-taped a stick around Sarge Bryan’s bruised neck and was holding the albino soldier like some kind of animal. “This one is special. More money for him.”

“Amir,” Miss Aleph said, and Ellie leaned menacingly toward the leader. “Why do I hear the ugliest asshole making a noise?”

“He has a point,” Amir said, looking at Sarge’s grim face. “Certain people would pay money for this freak’s eyes. So you take the rest of him. We keep his little blue peepers, huh?”

Amir pulled out a short broad-bladed knife. Ellie thought with rising horror: could it be specially purposed to shucking out eyeballs?

“What’s taking you so long?” Miss Aleph snapped at the guy fiddling with the satellite dish control. “Did you get any training with the Belladonna system? Launch diagnostic mode. This will only take a few seconds.”

Ellie had no idea what this part of the plan was. Ellie vowed to get more details in advance the next time she risked her life on the word of a silicon chip.

“It’s connecting to the tor-onion link.”

All the villains gathered around the console, which was on a desk next to the caravan. They were eager to watch the money transfer and stood in a group under the huge satellite dish. The crater-faced captor dragged Sarge Bryan with him.

Ms. Sato, that’s no good! Miss Aleph texted inside her helmet. *The subjects have to be together in a group, but Sarge Bryan cannot be among them.*

Do something, or we’re all doomed!!

66

CANADA HOUSE JERUSALEM

LIA

Jehdeiah's sickle gouged into Tariq's midsection under his rib cage. The failed terrorist was dragged around the corner. His bound body twisted and squirmed in agony like a struggling animal. After the curved blue steel blade ripped through his diaphragm and poked into a lung, his protests were reduced to burbling noises. Tariq's heels skidded over the dry blood trail which had, earlier in the day, been made by the murdered yeshiva student. The thug's moans of dismay ended abruptly.

After the community center had been cleared of the enemy, the Brit HaKana'im boys were in a celebratory mood. Lia Baumann scowled. Celebrations were for after a war. This one had not even begun.

"We have to get these people out," she told him.

Jehdeiah thought a moment. There were a few hundred people from the Musrara area who had taken shelter in the community center.

"They cannot come with us. Our destiny is in the Old City on the Temple Mount. We cannot delay. They should stay here."

The guy was a capable marauder, but not IDF.

"You took Canada House in five minutes with no casualties. Tariq was a shmendrik loser. If the serious insurgents show up, this place is a death trap."

“There’s a secret way out,” Private Goldstein said. Her bandaged head was bent over one of the few living terrorists, securely zip-tying him. “But... then where to?”

Goldstein started to stand up, then stumbled back to the floor. She waved Lia away and leaned against a wall. The explosions from the stun grenades had not helped her head trauma.

“Secular Israeli forces are digging in at the Knesset compound,” Jehdeiah said. “They’ve got dozens of tanks and thousands of troops.”

That may not be enough, Lia thought.

“The Arabs are in control of the Temple Mount, damn them,” Jehdeiah said. “But IDF holds the big plaza in front of the Western Wall. There were troop movements there and rumors of cease-fire talks with our chief rabbi and the Waqf imam taking place at Mughrabi Bridge. As if it is useful to speak with this vermin.”

Rabbi Baumann. The idea of seeing her father-in-law, a cabinet member, and long phalanxes of IDF security struck Lia as the best thing she had heard in a long time.

Lia pulled out the phone she had found on Tariq. “I’ll try to get a signal outside.”

“Oh, no you don’t,” Steph said. “We’re not letting you out of our sight.”

Spencer, Steph, and her parents followed her out into the bounded square in front of Canada House. Lia opened the phone, wiping a sticky mix of chocolate and Tariq’s blood off the display. She dialed David’s primary personal comm number. If Miss Aleph were logged in, she would forward the call to wherever he was.

No answer. No signal.

Jehdeiah was checking equipment and counting heads. Goldstein was organizing wounded civilians so they could be carried out the back way. Lia looked at the debris around Canada House. There was a way out, which might lead to the parliament grounds. But what if Rabbi Baumann was

already going to the Western Wall? David would certainly go to protect his father. That was the best chance of finding him in this mess. She made sure Goldstein was capable of helping the civilians to safety and decided.

She, her parents, and her two friends joined Jehdeiah's heavily armed group as they prepared to head out from Musrara toward the walls of Jerusalem's Old City.

"Oh my heck," Spencer said, holding Steph's hand. "I really miss Utah."

BETWEEN JERICHO AND JERUSALEM

ELLIE

With rising panic, Ellie gathered that Sarge Bryan was in the wrong spot. For Miss Aleph's plan to work, Sarge Bryan had to be away from the villains and over by Atticus and the other prisoners. It was time to improvise.

During her brief time in acting class, Ellie had played Yelena in *Uncle Vanya*. She had insisted on playing it with a Russian accent. That experience had never come in handy, until today. She flipped up the visor of her helmet.

"N-now that you mention it," she said, hoping she sounded like Miss Aleph trying to sound like a Russian operative. "He does have wonderful eyes, that one. Let the komandir have a closer look. He may want these eyes for himself."

She pointed to her large friend Kenny, who was standing stock-still, pretending to be her cyborg bodyguard.

"You'll pay?" The greedy fellow yanked Sarge Bryan's leash.

"*Da*. We can keep it just between us, yes?" Ellie added holding out her hand. She hoped to keep them concentrating on double-dealing so they would not notice the terrified look on her face.

The evil man was wary of getting close to Kenny after seeing him shooting a corpse to pieces. He gave Ellie the stick taped around Bryan's neck. She led him over to the New Zealander, who was probably frozen with fear, but the

way he was bundled up gave the impression his metal joints just needed lubrication. The ugly guy went back to stand with the others who were all clustered under the Belladonna array.

“No money there yet,” Amir complained.

“First decide on shares you each get,” Ellie said.

As the bickering in various languages intensified, no one except for the prisoners noticed what else was going on. Mr. Perdix looked amused, or maybe that was his left eye swelling shut. Baumann’s lips were compressed in a grim sneer.

The large satellite dish was angling down to the ground, right where the insurgents were standing. Miss Aleph had conned the villains into letting her take control.

Careful to look anywhere but at the disk, Ellie admonished her fake cyborg Kenny. “Don’t look so jealous. You are twice the cyborg this one is. Tell me what you think of his—”

“Ahhhhhh!”

All six of the kidnappers began making horrible sounds while grabbing their heads. Stuff oozed out from their noses, mouths, eye sockets, and ears. Strawberry puree squished between their fingers.

Miss Aleph returned to her normal voice.

“I’m poaching the contents of their skulls with microwaves.

“By the way, that was the worst Russian accent I’ve ever heard. You’re lucky they were too greedy to notice.”

Ellie pouted slightly. Her turn as Yelena had been described as “scintillatingly steadfast.”

Kenny collapsed in a heap and moaned.

“What if your trick hadn’t worked?” Ellie snapped. “What if Sarge had been in the micro-ray field?”

She undid Bryan’s zip-tied hands. “Why didn’t you just pay them real money?”

“Why does everyone assume AIs are rich?”

Sarge took his leash back from Kenny.

“Uh, son, you can let go of that now.”

“Oh, sorry, mate,” Kenny said. He gestured to the villains on the ground. “They look in a bad way.”

The would-be eyeball bandit was still conscious and crawling away.

“Not bad enough,” Sarge said, ripping the duct-taped stick off his neck. His electric-blue eyes stared at the crawler. “Miss Aleph, is it clear?”

“Bad guys brains poached to perfection. Microwave output at zero.”

The albino soldier jogged over to the heap of corpses, kicking one that looked lively. He grabbed his pockmarked antagonist and dragged the fellow over to Atticus and the others.

“Captain,” Sarge said, controlling himself, “do we need any of these guys?”

Atticus paused as though deliberating over some ethical issue. Then he shrugged almost apologetically to the captive and said, quite deliberately, in that charming American accent, “Nope. Can’t say we do, Bryan.”

With speed and ferocity that made even Baumann flinch, Sarge hefted the guy up against the trailer wall and punched him just under his rib cage. Air and phlegm gushed out of the man’s mouth and upturned nostrils.

He hit, again and again. When it was certain there was no more air in his lungs, Sarge covered the man’s nose and mouth with his big blanched-white hands and pressed. They stood there, human eye to blue glowing eye, as the cruel git suffocated to death.

In a very uncyborg-like way, Kenny threw up. Sarge undid Atticus’s cuffs, and they exchanged grim nods of satisfaction. Baumann looked on appreciatively at Sarge’s handiwork, as though making a mental note to try that sometime.

“Ellie, are you all right?” Atticus asked rather charmingly and took her helmet.

Ellie tried to keep her back to the pile of dead bodies. She fidgeted with Baumann’s restraints as though she knew how to unlock them with a hairpin.

Amir's body might have the key, but he had been gross before his brains were pressure cooked inside his skull. Now he looked like a microwaved Halloween pumpkin.

She would just wing it with a hairpin.

Miss Aleph was back to speaking in her normal grouchy tone.

"Hi, Dave. Fine thing you do, attaching me to a civilian."

"I think she did exceptionally well," Baumann said in a slightly flirtatious manner. "All the right people are dead, and we've captured an enemy base with no losses."

He looked at her. "The top agents in Mossad or Shin Bet couldn't have done better."

"It was all my idea."

"Miss Aleph," Baumann said ogling Ellie with the one of his eyes which was not swelling shut, "as soon as you grow nice legs leading up a slim, tight waist like she has, you can go out in the field on your own."

Machismo and flirting while chained to a caravan and having just been beaten to a pulp? *It must be an Israeli guy thing*, Ellie concluded. Something inside the handcuff clicked.

"Hey, I got it," she exclaimed as her hairpin-in-the-lock idea actually worked. She moved on to Mr. Perdix.

"I should have foreseen the presence of an electronic warfare unit when we were flying." The DARPA man moaned. His ego was more bruised than his body. "All those dead drones and aircraft scattered around. This facility has been clearing Israeli airspace since the start of the conflict."

"Where did you find our new friend?" Nobu asked, indicating the retching Kenny. Their radio expert was trying to pick his own lock with a long screw he had pulled out of the trailer wall.

"This is Kenny. He's from New Zealand. And... nobody laugh now," Ellie said. "He's a genuine Samaritan."

Everyone laughed.

Sensing the danger was over, Marwood came out from behind the wreck of

a volocopter. The tailless monkey ran and hid behind Corporal Singh's leg.

"Our church sponsored my trip here," Kenny said, spitting and taking off some of his fake cyborg gear. "I discovered my ancestor was a Jewish Samaritan. I was here, meetin' some very charming folks, reconnecting with ma roots, when all this guff happened."

After the dead bodies were tidied away, the rest of Kenny's group came into the camp. They were refugees from various battle zones all over the Territories.

"Your weapons," Baumann said, eyeing the three elderly men, two women, and four children suspiciously. "They are the latest IDF design. Well-oiled and tuned. The Palestinian Authority cop wasn't carrying this."

Before Baumann beat the truth out of a six-year-old, Atticus stepped in.

"Let them get some water and food first."

Drop-ship pallets inside the hidden compound were full of high-quality emergency rations and clean water.

"That's mine, you big putz," an older man said, grabbing the sleek rifle from Baumann with both gnarled, age-spotted hands. "I'm Sharett, member of the Yesha Council for our settlement. When there was a settlement," he added bitterly.

"Zaydeh Sharett," David said. "That's an antitank gun. Do you even know how to use that?"

"I was in the Second Intifada." Sharett quickly removed the weapon's magazine, checked for dust, and jammed it back in. "We lost more people and more civilians during the Palestinian uprisings than in the Six-Day War. It was the worst, until now."

The elder warrior shook his finger at Baumann.

"Where were you, our IDF? We saw planes flying but just confusion in the streets. The explosions, like nothing I'd ever felt. They shook us in our bomb shelters."

Sharett was getting madder and madder. Ellie stepped between them.

“I’m part of an international force that’s trying to put things right,” she said. “Major Baumann’s working with us and the Americans over there. Can you tell us of anyone in need of urgent assistance?”

Sharett thought a moment and strapped the weapon on, its butt end nearly dragged on the ground.

“Everyone who could walk got out through the unfinished hyperloop tunnels, toward Jerusalem. Then the access ramp got bombed. It might have been our own planes that did that. Meshuggeneh!”

“We can help your group get to the Samaritans’ holy mountain.” Ellie tried to look on the bright side. “Right, Kenny?”

“There’re only about two thousand Samaritans in the world. We’d all go ter Mount Gerizim in the event of catastrophe.” Kenny looked around at the shallow graves behind the satellite truck and the smoldering wreckage of the volocopters. “This certainly bloody qualifies.”

“You two are in charge,” Atticus said to Kenny and the old settler. “No one can stay here. Either the insurgents will wonder what’s happened to their jamming station or IDF will bomb the crap out of it. Get supplies and decide what vehicles you’re taking.”

After the men moved away, Baumann shook his head and dabbed alcohol on his neck. It looked like one of Amir’s men had tried to strangle him with a piece of barbed wire.

“The only way civilians get weapons like that is Red Dawn,” Baumann said.

“Red what?” Ellie asked.

“It’s the highest state of civilian alert.”

“Israel’s DEFCON One. The ‘cocked pistol,’” Atticus said. “Prelude to Armageddon.”

“The last time we even came close was the worst days of the Yom Kippur ambush by Egypt and Syria,” Baumann said. “It means barricades in the streets and house-to-house fighting until the IDF regroups and restores

order.”

“What about Jerusalem?”

“It’ll be the worst off. Armies have always held off from large engagements because of the Temple Mount and the holiest sites for three major religions.”

“What’s the population of Jerusalem?” Atticus asked as he ripped open one supply crate after another.

“About six hundred thousand Jews and four hundred thousand Arabs. All will be at each other’s throats in narrow streets and alleyways.”

Atticus hefted a bulging pack of scavenged supplies. “We’ve got to get there. Let Baumann deliver his intel to someone in charge before the wrong country gets nuked.”

“Is that dish working?” Mr. Perdix asked. “Or did Miss Aleph burn it out with her flash cooking demo?”

“It’s usable,” Nobu said guardedly. “But no telling who else is connected to this network.”

Baumann shook his head.

“Sneaking some people through the Dead Sea pipeline is one thing. Setting up sophisticated equipment like this in the middle of Judea and Samaria is another. The IDF chain of command is compromised.”

Nobu set the jamming dish to burn itself out in self-destruct mode. They made sure the Samaritans had enough supplies and the best vehicles to get them to Mount Gerizim.

“Mr. Nobu,” Sarge yelled, “is our ride ready?”

The caravan trailer was attached to a large tractor unit. On the side was stenciled something in Hebrew.

“Auerbach’s Kosher Meat Can’t be Beat,” Baumann translated.

“Just checking for trackers,” Nobu said, diving under the axle as Mr. Perdix fussed with a toolkit. “Say, were those people really Samaritans, like from the Bible stories?”

“I was a little preoccupied,” Sarge Bryan said, “over not having my ocular implants cut out and sold to the highest bidder. But yeah, they coulda been. Samaritan tradition goes back before Babylon to Ephraim and the founding tribes of Israel.”

“Sergeant Bryan,” Baumann said, “I had no idea you were such a biblical scholar.”

“My parents are preachers and missionaries.”

“Then we have something in common. My father is a rabbi.”

“I’m sure our upbringings have made us the moral and respectable gentlemen we are today.”

Ellie waved to Atticus. “Can I pitch in anywhere?”

He smiled. “No, I think the males in distress you rescued can take it from here.”

“When I came up over that hill, I really was expecting to be shot on the spot.” Ellie started giggling. “And that’s not funny at all.”

She gave in to the post-traumatic mirth.

“Say.” She gestured to the dirt mounds with the buried bad guys. “Do you think it hurt much? When they got zapped?”

Sarge Bryan thought a moment and said, “Just the right amount.”

...

After traveling ten kilometers along serpentine back roads, they arrived on the outskirts of East Jerusalem. The truck tractor unit could have held all of them, but Atticus had decided they needed additional vehicles for scouting. Two jet bikes in ground mode roared beside them, Sarge and Atticus astride their sleek metal frames.

Nobu drove the truck, Ellie was in the middle, and Corporal Singh and Mr. Perdix took turns scanning ahead with binoculars. They passed burned-out cars. There was nothing left of the tops, and their tires were messy pools of black sludge melted on the gravel. There were specks in the sky.

“Just buzzards,” Corporal Singh said.

“That’s reassuring,” Ellie said as gamely as she was able.

“Up ahead, there’s a Green Line guard hut,” Mr. Perdix said. “It’s manned.”

“Could be IDF,” Nobu said.

“I’ll check,” Baumann said. The truck stopped, and he limped out.

The afternoon heat had sent up boiling heat waves, which seemed to lift the whole scene on the horizon up on a finger of pure light, like a mirage.

“Should we let him go alone?” Ellie asked.

“Less threatening this way,” Sarge Bryan said.

They kept watch as Baumann rode a cycle slowly and steadily to the checkpoint. He held the handlebar with one hand and casually ate an Auerbach’s sandwich wrapped in tin foil.

They stopped him twice. Once about one hundred meters away, then again about twenty meters from the small outpost. This was comprised of a few barrels and a broken bit of timber placed across the road. The actual bunker looked burned out and empty.

After what looked like a friendly discussion, Baumann threw his foil wrapper in the barrel between the two guards. Faster than Ellie could follow, he dove for cover around a building. The two guards drew weapons. Before they could fire, the barrel blew up, knocking the two men sideways.

Baumann got up, dusted himself off, and shot the sentries on the ground. After searching the area, he waved them forward. When they met up, Baumann was still picking gravel out of his forearms.

“Unfriendlies, huh?” Atticus said, inspecting the new carnage.

“They were well prepared,” Baumann said, giving the cycle back to Sarge Bryan. “But they didn’t know camel meat is never kosher. That’s when I decided to pull the pin out of the hidden grenade with my teeth.”

Miss Aleph rang.

Everyone turned. It had been so long since they’d heard any normal-sounding electronic communication.

Of course Miss Aleph must also work as a phone, Ellie thought. With all her other functions, it was easy to forget.

“Dave, it’s for you. It’s your wife, Lia.”

**MUSRARA DISTRICT
JERUSALEM**

LIA

Jewish militiamen bandaged their wounded and ran to and from their armored SUVs. Smoke billowed quietly from the second-story windows of Canada House. Lia stood in the courtyard with her parents, Steph, and Spencer.

Unbelievably, the third time she tried dialing her borrowed cell phone, it connected.

“Who’s this? This is an IDF secure line. We’ll track you down and—”

“Shut up, Aleph, it’s me.”

“Where have you been? Why are you in Jerusalem?”

“Put David on.”

“Oh. Right.”

Through the static, she knew his voice. It was David, at last. “Lia?”

“It’s so good to hear you. I’m safe with Mom and Dad. You’ll never believe—”

A hundred unintelligible characters raced across the phone’s display screen. The connection was breaking. Lia had to tell David where to find them.

“Old City! I’m with the Brit HaKanaïm militia,” Lia yelled. “Western Wall if you can!”

The line cut out.

One word, that was all she heard from David in a sea of stupid static. She stared at the no-signal bars and the stupid nonsense symbols crawling across the screen.

Lia was about to throw the phone at the flagstones. Before she could, one of Jehdeiah's militia men hit the flagstones head first. He dropped straight down from the roof. Steph screamed. The armed militia pointed weapons.

The dead man had been shot neatly through the neck. He had been on the top of Canada House, keeping watch after they had retaken the shelter. Jehdeiah swore. Lia thought fast.

"The real Grey Wolves are coming," she yelled at the aggressive but inexperienced fighters. "Take cover!"

A mortar round hit the tennis court down the block. Had she made a terrible mistake? Would they be better off heading for the Knesset strongpoint? Her parents, Steph, and Spencer looked at her anxiously.

More mortar rounds whistled down. She pushed her parents out of the courtyard, away from the entrance. Her friends followed. The rounds landed with blasts of steel and stone shrapnel. They also started to burn, spewing out heavy white smoke and tremendous heat.

White phosphorus!

Private Goldstein was on the other side of the conflagration. Behind her were most of the two hundred former hostages. The soldier's head bandage had started dribbling crimson again. She looked at Lia.

"Incoming enemy!" Lia cried through the acrid smoke. "Get the civilians out to the government campus. We're going with the militia."

These white phosphorus shells were ravager-type munitions. After landing, remnants of the mortar rounds crawled around in circles, looking for something or someone to burn. Goldstein grimaced, shielded her face, and gave Lia a thumbs-up sign. She followed the very brawny and moderately bright Jehdeiah and looked to his men. They had been victorious moments ago; now some were dead, others wounded, and he had to retreat. He choked

on the fumes. To Lia, he looked a little stunned.

The regular forces of the Grey Wolves were close, their numbers unknown, and they were attacking aggressively. Despite what she had told David, if the Old City was overrun, its narrow streets would be a death trap.

“We could still get to the Knesset compound,” Lia said.

Jehdeiah shook his big head. He led the way to a line of sleek electric-powered assault vehicles. His fighters rearmed but did not get in.

“Parliament, the state,” he said. “They are nothing to us. Tonight we fight for the true prize: the Temple Mount. We are going. Are you with us, Lia Baumann?”

Lia looked around. Her parents held cloths over their mouths against the smoke. Spencer and Steph pulled a rucksack of water and supplies out of a militia vehicle. She struggled for her reply.

Ulla was a militiaman who carried a long breaching bar mace. He said, “We should fight them here.”

Pumped with battle lust and the recent righteous slaughter, Jehdeiah reloaded his shotgun and glanced back at the corpse of their comrade. It was out of reach, burning. Lia could tell he only had revenge on his mind.

“No way,” Lia said suddenly. “Those are not street thugs like Tariq’s bunch. I’ve seen Grey Wolves in action. The real insurgents demolished the 188th tank brigade in minutes.”

Jehdeiah bristled. For a second, Lia thought he was going to do something stupid just to show he was in charge. That would leave them alone in a Jerusalem that was getting more insane every minute. The city would soon be dark. Over the flat rooftops, the setting sun descended toward a horizon that was burning in a deep red glow.

More mortars landed in a precise salvo.

“The Army woman is correct, Ulla,” Jehdeiah said finally. “There’s no point in staying in a fixed position and fighting an enemy we know nothing about.”

The Brit HaKanaim men, and a few women who looked like female Jewish serial killers, moved out. They went on foot; the vehicles would be useless on the other side of the stone fortifications that bounded the Old City. They threaded down both sides of the street, sticking to cover and using decent urban warfare tactics.

Lia took point. A vehicle was coming. Ulla wanted to shoot it. Lia pushed his shotgun to the ground. Jehdeiah gave her a look.

“I know. You’re in charge,” said Lia. “But this is a city. Most of the people are civilians. You have to enforce some rules of engagement.”

A robot street cleaner chugged past them. It was shot so full of holes she wondered how it was still working. Jehdeiah grunted affirmatively.

“Until we reach Temple Mount. After that, anyone in our way stands between us and the Holy of Holies, they will be crushed.” He turned to his group. “*Chazak u'varuch!*”

“*Chazak ve'ematz!*” they roared back.

They were almost to Elisha Street when an enormous series of explosions erupted to the east. It came from the direction of the roadway heading into Damascus Gate, which led straight into the Muslim Quarter of the Old City. It was a no-go.

There were only so many gates through the Ottoman-era walls surrounding the Old City. Beyond Damascus Gate, there was Herod’s Gate. But it was only a mouse hole leading to a fifty-foot-long passageway through the barbican fortification. Storming it was suicide.

The next closest was New Gate. It led into the Christian Quarter inside the ancient fort. It had a wider entrance and would be much harder for defenders to block.

“New Gate it is,” Jehdeiah agreed.

As they advanced, Lia made sure to keep her parents and two friends near the back of the line of fighters. The setting sun drew long shadows down the large paved streets. They moved the half-kilometer distance quickly and

encountered no resistance.

Jehdeiah signaled. Their ragged infantry column halted. Up ahead was the gate, a heavy vaulted stone archway that led through the ancient fortifications. People were straggling out. Some pushed handcarts, some carried children; a man with a recently blown-off leg was on the back of an overloaded scooter. He kicked himself along with his good leg.

“No one’s there,” Jehdeiah said.

Lia saw no Grey Wolves, no opportunistic thugs like Tariq. Jehdeiah was anxious to charge in. He was close to his goal. Were they really thinking to capture Temple Mount for Judaism? After that, what? Build the Third Temple?

Lia had felt the same way earlier in the day as they had approached Canada House. Her eagerness to see her parents safe had made her sloppy. Lia had taken the traitor boy in without thinking twice. People died who shouldn’t have.

“That’s not a good thing,” she said, putting her hand on Jehdeiah’s massive armored shoulder. The militiaman halted his squad.

“What do you see?”

“Same as you. No border police, not even Islamic Waqf guards.”

If Israeli security forces had been pulled away, someone would have stepped in to prevent robberies or at least warn of insurgents trying to enter through New Gate. *Unless...*

“They’re already here.” Lia raised her scope, switching to daylight setting. “Up on the parapet.”

She pointed the device and signaled with her blue button. If those were Grey Wolves, she might be able to fool them with a false friendly signal. Her scope also revealed a hovering surveillance drone. It was inexpertly covered with camouflage tape.

“How good is your designated marksman?”

“Really good,” Jehdeiah said with pride.

“Then he’ll have no trouble knocking down that coated stealth drone and taking out the hidden sentry on the wall before either can react.”

Again, Lia flashed her Grey Wolves device. A response blue light came from a shadow beside a pillar at the top of the wall.

The Brit HaKanaim marksman was decent but not outstanding. He knocked the drone down but let the guy on the wall duck back. Jehdeiah followed up by blasting a few explosive shrapnel rounds. That neutralized the Grey Wolves sentry and also made a hellacious racket.

The group of civilians coming out of New Gate knew the drill. They hunched down along the wall. The only figures who did not duck down were armed insurgents trying to see where the fire was coming from.

The next few seconds would mean victory or disaster.

“Go!” Lia yelled.

They had to go in before the insurgents sealed the gate off with a bus and set it on fire. The next gate over, Jaffa, was hundreds of meters away, and who knew what awaited them there.

The Jewish militiamen did not have to be told twice. They shot more recklessly than Lia would have liked. Fortunately, she could not see any collateral injuries to the huddled civilians.

Lia recognized how the Grey Wolves were deployed. The insurgents had been expecting an armored assault. Lia had met David during an IDF course on urban warfare. The case studies had been on the Battle of Grozny, in which 5,000 lightly armed defenders had held off 60,000 Russian attackers with tanks. She knew this setup.

An antitank missile lanced out from the battlements. Badly aimed, it exploded on the façade of the office building opposite New Gate. It did little damage but shattered a hundred plate-glass windows and kicked up a lot of dust. The militiamen took cover from the falling glass and they hesitated.

Wading through the dust and smoke, Lia found Jehdeiah. He was faltering. “There’s too many,” he said, coughing. “They have heavy weapons...”

If their leader lost his nerve, the militia would lose unit cohesion. They would not run; they were brave souls to the last man and woman. But frozen in place without leadership, the Jewish militia would be picked off one by one by the Grey Wolves. Lia's parents, Spencer, and Steph would have to run through Jerusalem streets that were now as dangerous as any besieged capital city of any failed state.

"No!" Lia yelled back. She grabbed his helmet straps so he would listen. "Rush them."

The enemy had set up a tactical formation called "bottle and bake." Perfected in Grozny, the Chechen defenders had pinned down entire Russian tank divisions with multisided attacks. The Grey Wolves had been waiting for the first Israeli tank to come through New Gate. They would have disabled it and the one at the rear of the column, trapping the rest of the armored vehicles.

The downside to the bottle-and-bake strategy was the Grey Wolves had spread themselves thin. They were in three- and four-man teams. This was just like the freeway assault Lia had witnessed. The insurgents relied on unexpected weaponry combined with speed. The only way to beat them was with greater audacity and even more speed.

"Jehdeiah, rush the fucking gate now!"

"You sure?" the militiaman asked.

"*Chazak u'varuch*," she said, as if it was the most self-explanatory thing in the Holy Land. *Be strong and be blessed.*

Jehdeiah gritted his teeth. "*Chazak ve'ematz.*" *Be strong and have courage.*

"Hey, you cocksuckers!" he yelled, letting off a salvo from his weapon. "*Chazak ve'ematz!*"

Jehdeiah ran straight at New Gate; his militiamen did likewise. An insurgent tried to drive a truck across the entrance and was shot to pieces. The Jewish attackers got inside, under the archway. After that, their superior

body armor and melee weapons were decisive.

Lia looked back to her parents and friends, who were sticking to cover. “Don’t move until I say,” she cautioned.

Spencer took his hands off his ears and gave a thumbs-up.

Lia hefted her rifle. She watched her sides and rear in case a spoiler force of insurgents had been positioned outside the walls. None showed up. One last enemy body tumbled off the New Gate parapets. Lia turned to her parents.

“These civilians.” She pointed to the people who remained. They were shell-shocked and did not know what to do. “Tell them to go home if it’s close. Canada House is destroyed, and the bad people seemed to be coming from the north. If they have nowhere else, tell them to go back inside the Old City. In ten minutes, we’re going to seal off this gate.”

Inside the boundaries of the City, Jehdeiah wiped gore off his favorite melee weapon, a long baton with a sickle head on the end.

“I really thought we were going to get killed,” he said jubilantly. “Or worse, fail!”

He looked as joyous as the Israelis who entered in triumph through Lion’s Gate during the 1967 War, which was the first time in 2,000 years Jews had retaken control of the whole of Jerusalem.

“Don’t get excited,” Lia said. “You were lucky there weren’t more of them.”

“I spit on chance. It is destiny, the will of Hashem, which brought you to us,” Jehdeiah said, shaking her shoulder with vigor. “What now?”

She told him.

All the civilians were safely out of the way. Lia pulled everyone back a hundred meters inside Jerusalem’s walls. A big lorry truck squatted under the archway. The militia had packed it with explosives.

“What did you find?” Lia asked the demolitions guy.

“Mostly rockets, grenades, and a piece of ordnance out of a padded case

the Grey Wolves were trying to deploy until we persuaded them not to.” The man smiled with several gold teeth. “No idea what that was, totally round, no markings. I stuck it in the bottom.”

He grabbed the detonator and prepared to twist the handle. “Everyone’s clear. Fire in the hole!”

Round explosive... Lia suddenly had a bad feeling.

Zulfiqar! A thermal device.

He twisted the detonator contacts closed.

“Wait!”

Too late. The first explosions blew the bottom out of the lorry and rocked the ten-foot-thick walls on either side of the gate. The top of the archway fell down, just as planned.

Lia waved her arms. “Back! Everyone back!”

One, two, three. Lia counted in her head as she tried to herd people back farther behind hard cover.

“I mean it.”

When she got to twenty-four, the munitions expert poked his head up, looking at his handiwork.

“Hey, girl soldier, I know what I’m—”

For the rest of the war, the man would have half his hair, one eyebrow, and a severe sunburn on the left side of his face.

One of the insurgents’ pyro bombs finally decided to detonate. Fortunately, the smaller TNT blasts had pushed it down under the cracked paving stones. Its heat and shockwave went up in a V shape rather than out laterally. Everything for eighty meters became a smoldering ruin. New Gate was gone, replaced by melted stone that looked like it had been upchucked out of a volcano.

“*What* was that?” Jehdeiah said as he helped dig one of his men out of the rubble.

Lia looked at the hole glowing in the failing light of dusk.

“The future.”

69

EAST JERUSALEM

DAVID

“It’s your wife, Lia.”

If there was ever a time he wished Miss Aleph was on mute, it was then. David was torn between shielding his privacy and realizing in combat there was no privacy. He had to trust Captain Atticus, Ms. Sato, and this unusual but so far unexpectedly capable group.

“If you’d rather take this alone...” the ever-polite Ms. Sato offered.

“No. We may need to split up. We need to share all our information,” David said. “Connect.”

Miss Aleph erupted in a cascade of static. The signal was probably not strong enough for a picture. Still, he kicked himself for smashing the front screen.

“Lia...?”

The connection started to fail in a torrent of hissing static. “WHERE ARE YOU?” David could not be sure any of his words got through.

“—safe with Mom and Dad. Old C—ty!” Lia yelled, as though she too feared the connection was failing. “Western—all if you can!”

“What?”

The signal cut out.

“Where did that come from?”

“Near Canada House, civilian emergency shelter.”

“Any news from there?”

“Nothing consistent. Rioting all over. Streets closed. Red Dawn in effect all over Israel and the Territories.

“One amateur video uploaded to a jihadi network showed heavy equipment on the Temple Mount demolishing the Western Wall.”

If the Orthodox community heard vandals were destroying Jewish holy sites, they would go berserk. They’d rush to the Temple Mount. Tens of thousands of Muslim Arabs would already be gathered up there. Lia was heading into a bloodbath.

David looked at the Spetsnaz jet cycle. He wanted to fire up the engines and fly to the Old City. He would. However, he had to work with Atticus. *Why* had Lia left Tel Aviv?

“We should send out an advance scouting party.” Atticus’s words snapped David out of his thoughts.

“Sarge Bryan,” David said, “can you see any Israeli aircraft? They may be camouflaged. Look for air disturbance and cool spots in infrared where they may be overcompensating to cover their heat trail.”

Bryan nodded. He turned his eyes, ones David was almost jealous of, to the horizon.

“Miss Aleph, give us the most detailed map you have.”

David ripped open a scroll filament screen to maximum width and set it on the ground. For once, the AI obeyed without backtalk.

“We’re here,” he said, pointing. “By Anata. It’s an occupied Palestinian town and close to the Shuafat refugee camp. We can see they’ve broken through the segregation wall, right there.”

David could tell Atticus was also measuring distances and visualizing topography. The American was probably worried about separating from his main group, and especially Ms. Sato.

“I don’t expect we’d get a warm welcome in that Shuafat camp, huh?” Nobu said.

Corporal Singh scanned the horizon with binoculars. Marwood also

strained to see into the distance.

“I can see some figures,” the Indian British soldier said. “They have bandanas over their faces and have doubtless seen us. They have set quite a large amount of things on fire, tires, and cars. They are keeping their distance for the moment.”

“I have to go,” David said.

“What?” Mr. Perdix obviously did not want to lose his tour guide services.

“I can’t ask you to fight my personal battles,” David said. “My first priority is my wife and my in-laws. Just beyond the Old City are the Jerusalem downtown core and the Knesset parliament buildings. It’s where the top levels of command and control will be located. I’ll get my family and bring them there.”

Atticus paused a moment. They both knew what was at stake. Every moment David’s brother had those nuclear devices, the region, tens of thousands of lives, hung in the balance.

Ms. Sato broke the silence.

“As you’ve pointed out, it is on our way,” she said in her common-sense tone. “We’ll all go. It seems merely a matter of plucking your relatives out of harm’s way and then making a dash to your headquarters. I have every confidence the world will be saved by sundown.”

It sounded easy. Maybe it could be.

“If you agree, I’ll go ahead.”

“And if we don’t agree,” Atticus said, “you’re going anyway.”

“Yes.”

He looked over at the jet bike. It was the same technology as the Israeli hover boards. Four jet engines welded to motorcycle seating. The instruments were all pictograms to allow people of any nationality to use them. This was way beyond Turkish technology. How deep were the Russians involved in the attack on Israel? Or had another group purchased equipment from them?

“What’s that high point?” The American pointed southwest to a spot about

two kilometers away.

“Mount Scopus. It overlooks the whole of the Old City,” David said. “It’s been used as a military base for centuries. Roman generals located their headquarters up there, and so did the Crusaders. Today it’s the location of our major medical center, Hadassah.”

“I’ll fly with you that far,” Atticus said. “Then I’ll wait for Sarge to get there with the truck or on foot. If I see their way is not clear, I’ll come back, and we’ll find another ground route in.”

Miss Aleph had no luck trying to operate the jet cycle remotely. David found the kick-starter for the jet engines and slapped the visor down on his helmet.

“Dave, I’m not sure about this mode of transport,” Miss Aleph said in Hebrew, which she preferred while nagging and complaining. “I can’t interface with the operating controls. You’ll be on manual. Perhaps I should stay with Ms. Sato. She’s quite good at getting out of tight spots.”

“You’re staying right in your pouch,” David said. “Keep trying Lia, and broadcast our IDF identity tag so Iron Dome missiles don’t shoot us down. This time please use updated codes.”

The jet bike’s engine thrust jerked a bit. It was powerful, and he was soon hovering steadily at seventy meters. He looked down. Atticus had also gotten off the ground. Like most Americans, he would throw himself into something and work out the details later. In the Holy Land, that was like jumping naked into thornbushes.

Atticus came level with him. David eased the flying machine forward. Instead of the jet nozzles changing angle, the whole craft dipped forward. He braced himself on the handlebars and checked that his wingman was keeping up.

From the air, the city looked awful. He resisted the urge to climb and get a better angle to see the Musrara neighborhood. The fighting was everywhere. It could not have looked worse in 1967 or even 1948.

David and Atticus passed a factory. A bank of broken windows erupted

with muzzle flashes. He dipped down. Were they aiming at him, or were they executing captured prisoners?

He led, angling north. He wanted to keep flying over a small green swath and approach Mount Scopus from the French Hill side. The throttle was hard to control. He drifted too far.

Underneath him was a line of burning tires.

“Dave, what are you doing? This is the Shuafat refugee camp. It’s full of *Arabs!*”

The residents were unhappy to see anything flying. A disorganized battery of mortar tubes lit up. He signaled for Atticus to swerve.

Nothing hit them.

The ground weapons were curious. What could they hope to hit with big-bore tubes firing straight up? David got back on course, but not for long.

“*Ben-zona!*” he swore, yanking his handlebars nearly vertical.

Twenty meters right in front of him, an Israeli hovercopter dropped its active camouflage. Five muzzles of weapons he knew very well were pointed straight at him.

“Where did that come from?”

Some yutz in the helicopter yelled at him through a loudspeaker: “*Land and give up your weapons.*”

“Miss Aleph can you reach them?”

“I think they’re receiving, but this Israeli aircraft’s AI is unusually dumb.”

David was not going to be delayed by a stupid passport check. He gave them an IDF Army hand signal that he heard them and that he and Atticus were moving on anyway. He hoped they would figure out he was a Jew and not an enemy without quizzing him on how many candles a temple menorah had.

“They are checking with command. They are using line-of-sight lasers to communicate. This may take some time.”

He thought about diving for Mount Scopus, betting they would not shoot at the hospital. But he couldn’t make that decision for his wingman. Hovering beside him, Captain Atticus was also in the friendly crosshairs.

“Small complication. You’ve been listed as Captured/KIA. All your security clearances have been

revoked.”

Boaz. It had to be. His brother was covering his tracks. David flipped up his helmet visor. A facial scan would sort this out. Just as he waved to the suspicious airmen in the hovercopter, phosphorous sparks lit up high in the sky. At about 300 meters altitude, little canopies opened up in the late afternoon sky.

Illuminating flares?

“Dave, I hear something. It’s not good.”

The first one arced down. It looked like a small firework. Except it changed course midflight and struck the middle of the Israeli hovercopter’s open door.

The helo caught fire from the inside out. The man he had just been signaling to fell out, trailing smoke as he burned. The helo’s rotors wobbled and slashed down sideways. David veered away. The helo spun toward the ground.

He glanced back. Atticus was following. He came up and flew beside him.

“Fox two! Fox two!” David yelled, using the code for incoming infrared homing ordnance. “Top-down antiaircraft devices with thermal homing. Stay low.”

David had wondered why IDF air power was not asserting itself. This was one good reason. Mortar-style launchers would send the ordnance packages up by the dozens. If they detected nothing, they would sink to earth, be collected, and shot up again. If their off-the-shelf infrared sensor saw a heat flare, they would release a drone trailing burning phosphorous, which caught fire on contact with air.

Vicious, crude devices worth a few hundred shekels had just brought down a helo worth millions. Flight crews would be cooked alive. It outraged David.

Not only him.

Six more Israeli copters, three small and three large, revealed themselves. They started in on the mortar brigade in the refugee camp. They targeted David and Atticus as well.

“Dave, they are refusing communications and using exceptionally harsh language.”

“They think we set up the other helo.”

Chain guns rattled. Large-caliber bullets hit the ground, tossing up debris and body parts. More phosphorous flares lit the afternoon sky. David and Atticus dove behind a smokestack tower.

The helos swerved and spat out goutts of decoy flares. A small one got hit. The pilot landed. As soon as he stepped from the burning craft, irregular ground forces engaged him.

If this was what was happening in the outskirts, the Old City must be a nightmare. Lia was right in the middle it. He motioned for Atticus to follow. Best bet was for them to land on Mount Scopus as near to the medical center as they could.

Then Atticus got hit.

Cannon from an Israeli flyer, a bullet from the ground, random shrapnel, it could have been anything. His wingman’s left-rear engine started jetting black smoke before the turbo fans disintegrated in a cloud of burning titanium.

These damned things, David thought. With no variable thrusters, they could not compensate if one of the jets went out. The American trailed fire and went down behind a low-rise building on French Hill.

THE OLD CITY**LIA**

The smoldering volcanic ruin of New Gate disappeared behind them. Lia, her parents, and friends followed the heavily armed Jewish militia. They darted ahead into the cramped maze of winding streets that made up Old Jerusalem.

Lia watched Jehdeiah take an aggressive point position down the cobblestoned street. She made sure Steph and Spencer were keeping up. The militia column was flanked on either side by team members clambering over rooftops. The roofs were uneven. Some were too high to climb. When they got to one that was ten feet or more, they deployed hydraulic grapplers from belt harnesses to get up on the next.

“These guys seem okay for now,” Lia said cautiously when they were out of earshot. “Just keep close. If we have to split off and ditch these guys, follow me and don’t look back.”

Her mother and father nodded. Steph eyed the militia cautiously, and Spencer looked like he would rather be anywhere in the world, not just Utah. They jogged to catch up.

The Old City was divided into four major ethnic quarters: Armenian, Muslim, Christian, and Jewish. Scores of paths and alleyways led from one to the next. Some cut off in surprise dead ends. On either side of them ran rows of tourist junk shops. All of them had their metal shutters closed fast.

From the demolished New Gate, they followed Hawalida Street. Lia studied Jehdeiah's weapons and tactics. He had talked about his time with the Foreign Legion and Russian mercenaries. His paramilitary group was trained and equipped for close-quarters urban incursion. They had been preparing to fight to recapture the Temple Mount by force for years.

Lia caught up with Jehdeiah. "Where to?"

Jehdeiah paused at an intersection. "Tower of David."

"That's by Jaffa Gate."

It was one of the main routes for vehicles into the Old City and stood only kilometers distant from the parliament buildings. If Israeli forces were in charge there, Lia decided she would split off. First, they had to make it through this twisty maze.

Crack!

"Haaa!" A bullet ricochet shattered a brick right in front of Spencer; his startled shout was halfway between a laugh and exhausted despair. Everyone ducked. Machine-gun fire was coming from up ahead. Lia pressed her back into the steel shutters of a shop. She checked her people, waving them back.

"Keep still."

The militia threw grenades and really foul tear gas. This was not your grannie's CS gas; it was IDF stock. Special chemicals caused choking seizures and overall muscle weakness.

It had no effect on the enemy's rate of fire. Bullets kept coming in, pinning them in the street and the teams up on the roofs. The group of Grey Wolves might have gas masks on or be high on amphetamines.

"They're dug in," Jehdeiah yelled down the line. "We go around."

"Where?" Lia shouted back. The street was a solid row of shops, and her parents were not climbing up on top of buildings.

With the sound of thunder hitting corrugated tin, one of the militia fired special rounds at a shop door. It caved in, and they ducked under jagged metal. The first shop they ran through sold clothing. Baseball caps and saris

flew back, hit her face, and were trampled under booted feet.

After destroying a few more shops, they circumvented the machine-gun strongpoint. Two militiamen went back to kill the enemy. The rest of them kept charging on through the zigzagging streets.

“Form up,” Jehdeiah said into his comm system. “We’re close.”

It had already occurred to Lia that Jehdeiah’s objectives were not the same as hers, or even the IDF’s. She hoped that would not be a sore point. But, gripping her pistol, she knew which side she had to be on.

Her mother and father looked exhausted and worried but did not seem on the verge of passing out. Spencer was in terrible shape.

“I gotta switch to diet soda,” he wheezed, bracing himself on the steel gates in front of a small boutique hotel. Not a single light shone in any of the windows.

“*Zine be-ayn*,” a militiaman on the roof swore. *A dick in your eye*. He had spotted something else in their way.

The rumbling of steel tank treads and the roar of high-powered motors gave a hint of what had put a dick in the proverbial eye.

At the end of this street was the Tower of David plaza, a big open space leading to Jaffa Gate. A member of the IDF greeted them. It had six eyes and an Israeli flag emblem welded to its steel chest. In four languages, the robot ordered them to stop moving.

Lia pushed past the Orthodox fighters.

“IDF friendly. Lieutenant Lia Baumann!” she yelled at the mechBrain automaton.

It thought for a second, scanning her face and ID. The damned thing looked like an overgrown fireplug on small tank treads and was carrying a grenade launcher. It spoke:

“I have authenticated your rank and status. How may I assist your mission? Would you like us to neutralize these hostiles?”

Jehdeiah, full of pride and victory, might have tried something dumb. Then six armed drones appeared above them.

“Thanks, UgVee 818,” Lia said, reading the semiautonomous sentry’s name off its chest plate. “They are friendlies. Paint them green to all units. Copy me back with confirmation.”

Lia was relieved. She had personally overseen the UgVee programming project. Somehow, UgVees had survived the computer virus attack that had shut down so many critical systems.

“This guy controls the flying drones,” she explained, guiding Stephanie, Spencer, and her parents past the robot soldier. “I want to make sure they are not going to drop grenades on you once I’m clear.”

“Uh, thanks,” Jehdeiah said, looking warily at the hovering weapons platforms.

Lia was heartened by seeing parts of the ancient city were still under IDF control. Someone definitely knew what they were doing.

Out in the square, robots and drones secured a wide perimeter. They were positioned to engage any insurgents sneaking up on Jaffa Gate. There were Merkava tanks and D9 A.M.red bulldozers. They kept spread out. If a tank was disabled, it could be pulled out of the way by the dozers. The IDF had probably made a sanitary corridor from Jaffa all the way to the Knesset parliament buildings.

The first human Israeli soldiers Lia met were under good cover next to Merkavas. A foul smell hit her.

“What’s that?” Spencer gagged. Steph pressed her hijab to her nose and mouth. It was worse than the CS gas.

“We aimed the Skunk into the sewer system,” the enlisted soldier said.

The Skunk was an armored vehicle used for crowd control and punishment of civilians. It was basically a water cannon that spewed liquid teargas goop. Protesters feared it. The Skunk often followed riot leaders home and doused their houses with the putrid crap. They were dousing the sewers.

“That’s one way of making sure sappers don’t crawl under your position,” Lia said. “You should send the small UgVees in too. Some of the Grey

Wolves have chemical gear.”

“Already done that,” the soldier said with an insolent tone. “Who are you again?”

He did a double take at her ID. “Er, we’ve already done that, ma’am. Maybe you want to meet the commander, ma’am?”

She did.

Jehdeiah was relaxing on the other side of the square. He compared weapons with some regular Army infantry guys. Lia was surprised the IDF guards did not try to disarm the Orthodox militiamen.

“Get these civilians some water and anything they need,” Lia ordered, pointing to her parents and friends. “Where is command and control?”

With this sudden appearance of organized Israeli strength, there was a chance sanity could return. Lia felt hope that the worst of this small war, or sudden intifada, whatever they would end up calling it, might be over.

Seeing the general who commanded the division supported her optimism.

“General Behar.” Lia saluted smartly. “First Lieutenant Baumann reporting, sir.”

Behar had sharp eyes topped by thick eyebrows. His close-shorn head looked like a sabra, a local prickly pear, covered with gray stubble. She had never met him but heard he was highly respected by his soldiers.

“Let’s speak English,” General Behar said, noticing Spencer.

The command center was located inside a tent strung between two big cranes outside Jaffa Gate. People ran back and forth with *paper*. Some of them looked like thermal *faxes*. Teen bodlim on bikes came with message tubes strapped to their backs. It was all so First World War.

“Communications still down, General?”

“We’re getting things back,” Behar said. “But I’m not goin’ to bomb my own troops because of a data glitch.”

He studied her with interest. The general motioned to a sentry drone being resupplied with grenades. “The robots your computing science team

programmed are the only ones still on the job, Baumann. It was a good call to insist on redundant backup software in each unit.”

“Maybe I can help,” Lia said. “Just let me get my parents and friends organized, sir.”

“Those are your folks? This is quite a reunion, then,” the head of Central Command said cryptically.

Between replying to a dozen courier messages, Behar caught her up on current events. They had lost communication with the Jericho border garrison. Jordan was in chaos. A general intifada had erupted all over Israel. The Green Line Wall was in ruins, and Gaza was in flames.

“What about the Syrians or Iranian-backed Hezbollah in Lebanon?”

“Staying out of it for now,” Behar said. “Our priority is the capital and the Knesset. Steinholtz, Jerusalem’s city rabbi, attempted peace negotiations at the Western Wall a few hours ago. It did not go well.”

Behar motioned to a monitor propped up against the side of a Merkava. It showed footage shot by a drone. There was the wooden ramp up to Temple Mount. Without preamble, a man in a black suit was thrown from the top. Rabbi Steinholtz fell some thirty feet down onto the stones at the base of the Western Wall. He was instantly still. Dead.

“Against my advice, our clerics are going to try again,” Behar said. “The prime minister has authorized a special envoy to restart peace talks with the Arab mob up on the Temple Mount.”

After that savage execution, the next person they sent would have to be a maniac or a saint.

“Lia!” a gravelly and familiar voice said out of a doorway. “What are you doing here?”

“Chief Rabbi Baumann,” the general said as he turned around, “I don’t think I need to introduce your daughter-in-law.”

71

OVER FRENCH HILL JERUSALEM

DAVID

Tracer rounds lanced up at David's jet cycle. He swerved around the brick smokestack, trying to see Atticus, who had gone down in flames.

He nearly ran into a small IDF helo coming the other way. He ducked under their rotors before they could puree him or the pilot could shoot.

The American spiraled down. He was going to crash. David lost sight of him. Russian equipment was not known for safety features. A rescue attempt might be futile. David realized he might be stuck on hostile ground miles from where Lia was.

From where he hovered, he could see the Dome of the Rock, a darkening crescent of gold glowing in the sea of smoke. The Western Wall was just beyond it. He dove after Atticus.

He had not been able to save Loeb, or Private Taga, or even that educated knob Seinwicz. He was damned if he would let this gung-ho Yankee get into his overcrowded conscience. The IDF helos broke off. They were concentrating on rescuing their downed pilot from Shuafat camp.

He descended; the ground came up fast. David jerked back on the handle. Like a very heavy street motorcycle, the flyer had little finesse but a lot of gravitas. The window of a compact car melted then exploded beneath him.

He bounced off the crushed hood and let the jet cycle skid to a stop.

David clambered down and took cover. Half the streetlights were out. Blackout shades covered nearly all the apartment windows. French Hill was a quiet liberal-mixed community of mostly secular Jews. It had too many open streets to be defended properly and was very close to majority-Arab areas. There was no telling who was in charge.

“Atticus?” he hissed around a corner.

The American’s crash landing had left a long gouge mark along the blacktop. David followed it to a line of shops.

“Bau—”

The reply was cut off by a dull thump.

Around the corner was a mini mall. Small restaurants, a key-cutting place, and a Holy Land Bike Rentals ringed a parking lot. Someone cursed. It sounded like Hebrew but with a strange accent. If the Grey Wolves had captured Atticus, his head would already be off his shoulders, and David would be exchanging gunfire with them.

“Israeli friendly,” David shouted around the corner. He repeated in English and Arabic just in case.

No reply.

“We’ve got you surrounded. Put down any weapons and step away from the American. If he dies, I’ll kill you and bomb each of your homes.”

Miss Aleph was no help. She looked like she needed the ICU of the nearest electronics hospital. Her case was battered, and only one LED light blinked on top.

“Okay, everyone,” David yelled back at his nonexistent strike team. “Let me give them one last chance. Keep your flamethrowers lit.”

David dashed out sideways, took in the scene, and crouched behind an uncomfortably small electric car. Atticus’s flying motorbike had crashed a few meters in front of where he was. The tail end was poking out through the smashed window of a restaurant.

In the doorway, an Asian held Atticus. The fellow, obviously a civilian, had a rifle slung on his back and held a meat cleaver to his prisoner's neck.

"We—heff—" Atticus said to no one in particular. "We just came for some takeout."

David could tell he was seriously hurt and in pain.

The young Asian man was alone and scared. That did not make him less dangerous. He shook Atticus to stop him from telling another dumb joke.

"Don't do that," David cautioned in English, leveling his pistol over the hood of the car. "I can probably drill you before you can cut a whisker off my friend with that meat cleaver of yours."

"Probably?" Atticus complained.

David shrugged. "He looks experienced with that thing. And I have to tell you, I am a bit tired."

Atticus, while able to joke, did not look like he could move. Besides assorted scrapes and swelling, his right toe was pressed up against his right knee. The man's lower right leg was folded back on itself.

"You Chinese?" David shouted.

"Korean."

"This your place?"

The sign said "Kim's Wings and Burgers."

"How'd you know?"

"Not many people carry a cleaver around in the street."

"They do tonight," said the man, who was probably in his mid-twenties. French Hill was home to Jews, Citizen Arabs, Druze, and a smattering of Christians.

"Who is the French Hill Home Front security guy?" David asked. A local businessman would know that.

"Ashof. He's dead."

"The deputy?"

"A woman with red hair. She's dead too."

“Okay, Mr. Kim, I guess you’re promoted.”

Kim looked like he wanted to run back into his shattered shop and barricade what remained of the door.

“That guy’s American. They’ve come to help.” David lowered his sidearm. He was not ready to holster it just yet. He came forward slowly and reminded himself even in Jerusalem civilians got freaked out at the sight of bloodshed and body parts.

“Put the cleaver down,” David said. “You’ve got a brand-new Galil rifle there. You know how to use it?”

“I’ve been shooting. I can defend myself.”

“You may have to.” David put away his gun. “But not against me. Or this guy, who has to be the worst contortionist act ever.”

Atticus, whose leg looked like it was made of silly putty, thought that was funny. His ashen face grinned, and he passed out for a second. Kim lowered away from the injured man’s neck and propped him against a broken display counter.

“Everyone else is in the shelter?” David said.

“Yes, we upgraded last year. It’s over by—”

“*Don’t* tell me where, Kim.” Modern bomb shelters were hidden. They could survive nerve gas attacks, but they would not stand up to the Grey Wolves’ thermal bombs. “So you guys raided the Red Dawn armory?”

“I didn’t even know there was such a thing as Shahar Adom until Ashof gathered us in the square and told us.” Kim searched through a backpack he had behind him. “Then the Shuafat camp people started fighting the Haredi Jews from Givat and Ramat.”

Shuafat was the biggest Palestinian Arab refugee camp in East Jerusalem. Once the separation wall came down, the Palestinians had not needed much encouragement. Since birth, noncitizen Arabs had been told by their leaders all Jerusalem belonged to them and had been illegally seized and occupied by Jews. They wanted to take back everything from the Jordan River to the

Mediterranean Sea.

“Wake up,” David said, shaking Atticus. “Or I’ll text a picture of you sleeping on the job to Ms. Sato.”

“Wha—?”

“The cops and the Army tried,” Kim said, giving up looking for medical supplies in his bag. He kicked it despondently to the corner of his wrecked restaurant. “There were hundreds of security people, but thousands of enemies. Only the local militias held them off. All the checkpoints got destroyed.”

The Haredi Jewish communities, the Orthodox, and the extreme secular Zionists had been preparing for all-out street fighting for decades. Now, in addition to their own stockpiled weapons, they had the Red Dawn civil-defense caches. Each side had the deadliest handheld armaments on the planet.

“Where’d they go?”

Kim waved his hand south. “Old City.”

They both looked at Atticus and his ridiculously bent leg.

“Oh, no,” the lame American said. “I’m not going to hide in that shelter while you have all the fun.”

“All right, Captain Gumby,” David said, looking for something to make a splint. “Let’s see if you change your tune after we set your leg.”

That took four drywall framing planks and a dozen yards of duct tape.

“Mr. Kim, the IDF just needs to borrow your car, and we’ll stop bothering you.”

“Put your window on Israel’s tab too,” Atticus said. He leaned on half of a short ladder which they had turned into a crutch.

Kim shook his head. “Hadassah Medical is close. With the Red Dawn road barriers up, there’s only one way through.”

“You’re gonna insist on showing us the way yourself.”

David was not going to argue. The American looked like he was ready to

pass out. Another gun, even an amateur, would be welcome.

They got into Kim's delivery van. It smelled like garlic, and the floor was sticky with spilled pop. David smashed all the lights front and back. In a few hours, it would be dark. They headed to Mount Scopus.

Only the main intersections had tank traps deployed as part of the security maze. Their new friend had a blood-smeared laminated card showing alternate routes.

"Point that rifle out the window with your armband showing."

Kim had a yellow Civil Defense armband to match the color of his Israeli license plate. If they ran into IDF, soldiers likely would not just shoot them on sight. David hoped. Jerusalem had not been this messed up since the War of Independence.

"Maybe I should be up there." Atticus moaned from the rear of the truck. He lay between a shelf and a mobile microwave oven.

"Lie still. If it hurts, bite on a pita bread," David said. "Kim, set your rifle's select fire to the fourth notch. That will ignite a tracer on each bullet you fire."

"Will it help me aim?"

"No, but it will scare the hell out of the enemy when you miss."

On the way up to Mount Scopus, they only saw one small knot of punks. Kim flashed the strobe light on the end of his rifle at them, and they scattered.

The final leg up to the hospital was so jam-packed with cars and wounded they did not need road barriers to stop traffic.

"We'll carry him."

"Like hell."

"Don't worry, Attie, I'll tell Ms. Sato you saved us all," David jibed.

"They might be hours getting here anyway."

Despite Atticus's protests that he could still walk on a leg that was able to bend like a rotten cucumber, they lifted and hauled the American through the crowds until they got to the emergency room entrance.

“No civilians with weapons!” a frazzled soldier from the border guard yelled at them.

Miss Aleph spoke from his pocket.

“Thank goodness we made it. I’m almost out of battery. Get me to a charging station!”

“Get in line,” a familiar voice said from behind them.

Lia?

David thought for a second it could be her. But that was just crazy dreaming. It was Ms. Sato; she was flanked by Sarge Bryan and Nobu.

“I’ve got recharge priority with my traveling curling iron,” the Eurasian woman said.

They had beaten him to Hadassah.

Mr. Perdix was attending a stretcher, checking a woman’s ear canal with a scope. The patient he was attending looked Arab, so David said in his best Palestinian dialect, “This guy is more comfortable fixing robots. If he says you’re deceased, get a second opinion.”

The woman smiled weakly.

“How the heck did you get here so fast?” Atticus asked his NCO.

“Sometimes flying isn’t the quickest way.”

“Or safest,” Nobu said, looking at the messy excuse for a splint on his commander’s leg.

“Where’s Corporal Singh?”

“He’s with the truck. They wouldn’t let Marwood into the hospital,” Sarge Bryan reported. “Major Baumann, we saw you had some communications problems with your air force.”

David shrugged. “Not the first time.”

“They buzzed us too,” Nobu said.

“We were all ready to hang out the white flags,” Ms. Sato said. “Then Sarge revealed a most welcome hidden talent.”

The albino man shrugged. “It doesn’t always work, but I was able to pulse in Morse code to them.”

“It was amazing,” Ms. Sato gushed. “It was like he was speaking through

his eyes to nearly invisible helicopters way in the distance.”

“My NATO-issued friend/foe tag code checked out, so they let us go.”

“Bryan, if you start signing autographs,” Atticus said, gritting his teeth as they cut away the duct-tape cocoon around his leg, “I’ll put you on report.”

“After that,” Sarge Bryan summed up, “besides a few detours around tank traps, the way to the hospital was pretty desolate.”

The outskirts of the city had cleared out. David knew there was only one place all the armed factions would be headed. Whatever this conflict was building up to, it would happen in the Old City, on the Temple Mount.

“Here, Ms. Sato.” David handed Miss Aleph to the British woman. “Make sure she gets a good battery charge. After your beauty equipment, of course.”

“Dave, you’re not leaving me with her again!”

In the hall, a soldier stood pressing a bandage to the side of his unconscious comrade’s head.

“Sorry, I need this.” David grabbed a fully charged handset from the man’s belt.

“Miss Aleph, register this handset and forward any calls.”

“All right. But that handset is a total downgrade. Please Dave, I’ll be recharged in thirty minutes.”

“Miss Aleph, convey this official order to the Hadassah medical staff in time of war: Captain Atticus and his team are invaluable to the defense of Israel. They are to get top-level IDF treatment.” He had to tease the prim and proper English woman one last time. “Including, if requested, topless nurses.”

“Yes, Major,” Miss Aleph said as a technician cleaned out bits of glass from the front side of her casing.

David nodded to Atticus and ducked away before anyone noticed his limp or the bleeding bandages on his own leg.

“Where to, sir?”

He had nearly forgotten about Kim the restaurant guy. The Korean looked haggard and scared.

“You’re Christian?”

The young restaurant owner nodded. "My family is from Seoul. They sent me to study at Hebrew University and bought the business to keep me from having too much free time. They wanted me to be closer to the Holy Land."

"You close enough yet?" David asked.

Kim smirked. When he and Atticus dropped in unannounced, it had taken guts to come out with a cleaver instead of hiding in the back of his shop. David thought he had potential.

"You want to do something for Israel?"

"I'm on a visa, but they've accepted me into the Army next year. I'm here to stay."

"Your enlistment date's just been moved up," David said. "I've got to do something. You can help me."

"What?"

"Find out where they put the dead Palestinians," David said. "The fresh ones."

**JAFFA GATE
OLD CITY****LIA**

Lia's father wept. It was not the hours of captivity in Canada House, or the mad dash through Jerusalem's streets of fire, it was seeing the great big bearded Rabbi Baumann that finally caused Mr. Suleiman to break down. He grasped his rosary and started speaking Latin. Being a bit smaller and much thinner, his attempt to hug the Jewish spiritual leader ended up looking like his arms were encircling a tree trunk dressed in a black coat.

"It's good to see you too, all of you," Rabbi Baumann said.

Behind her father-in-law, Lia noticed Rabbi Toledano and a knot of Shin Bet security forces. They were led by a severe-looking blond man of about David's age.

"Shalom," Rabbi Baumann said to Jehdeiah and his militiamen. "You may not be aware, but a considerable force of militia like yourselves has advanced to the Jewish Quarter and the areas around the Western Wall. However, a much larger force of Palestinian Arabs and members of the Grey Wolves insurgency occupy the Temple Mount itself. The general has the latest."

General Behar unfolded a paper map of the Old City.

"The Mount is one hundred and fifty dunam in area, or one hundred and fifty thousand square meters."

“We know,” Ulla said roughly.

Jehdeiah swatted Ulla on his armored shoulder. “He’s a general. A hero of Israel. Show respect.” The unruly force’s leader turned to address the IDF commander. “Sir, what we would like to know is: when are we going to combine forces to take the Temple back from that filth?”

“As I was saying,” Behar said evenly, “there are approximately one hundred thousand people on the top of the Temple, and possibly more in the Solomon’s Stables levels near the Al-Aqsa Mosque. Many are unarmed and appear to be civilian worshippers trying to protect the sacred Islamic structures.”

“Too bad for them.”

“How the hell did they get so many people in there so fast?” Ulla asked.

“The insurgents have opened Sha’ar HaRachamim, the Golden Gate.”

“*Bat-zona!*”

“As a result they have easy access to the top of Temple Mount.” Behar indicated the east side of the Mount. “The Western Wall is sixty feet high. Attacking across the wooden bridge at the Mughrabi entrance is suicide.”

“You can bomb them.”

“I’m not going to be the cause of the biggest massacre in Jerusalem since the Romans.”

Rabbi Baumann stepped forward. “We are going to negotiate.”

“After what those animals did to the other rabbi?”

Baumann looked grave but steadfast. “Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem Steinholtz was a friend. He will be missed. But now the real sheikh of the Waqf is up on the Temple Mount. I can reason with him. He can reason with his people.”

To Lia, it sounded so easy. Then she remembered the other rabbi’s body lying on the dusty flagstones, his body broken in a heap under his dark suit.

“You don’t have go yourself,” Lia said. “I can rig one of these robots with telepresence. Talk from a safe distance first.”

The elder Baumann shook his head. “It’s been arranged. At sundown, I

will meet the sheikh. I'll be on a platform, and the Muslim leader will be on top of the Wall. We will shake hands, and this terrible conflict will end."

73

HADASSAH MEDICAL CENTER

DAVID

At David's request for fresh corpses, restaurant owner Mr. Kim returned an inscrutable look. Then he nodded and dodged through the crowded hospital corridor.

David walked straight out the front and over to a fat ZAKA van driver in a kippah and a tallit-fringed shawl, which he had tucked back in a futile attempt to keep it free from bloodstains. His nametag was spattered with orange antiseptic and yellow mustard.

"Shalom, Schlomo," David said. He switched to English as many Orthodox Jews were uncomfortable using the holy Hebrew language for secular matters, and his Yiddish sucked. The guy was a Zihuy Korbanot Ason volunteer. His ZAKA suicide bomb cleanup van had become an ambulance.

"Why don't you get some coffee and supplies?" David grabbed a cloth off a passing gurney. "I'll clean your ambulance while you're gone. Then we'll have chat for two minutes, sababa?"

Clearly overworked and operating solo, the driver grunted and shuffled off to a food table set up for relief workers.

David started with the arterial spray on the ceiling. No sense in starting on the walls or the floor while that was dripping. He was halfway done when the driver returned. Schlomo had a mobile lunch propped on top of a medical

supply suitcase, which he pushed along on its wheels. David needed up-to-date information as to what was happening. As he suspected, Schlomo had an excellent memory.

“You can’t even think about going into the Old City now,” the medic said between gigantic bites into a pita-wrapped schnitzel.

“Who controls the gates?”

The Old City was a walled sixteenth-century fort. There were gates in from modern Jerusalem and other gates up onto the Temple Mount citadel. Only one, the Golden Gate, was both. It had been walled up for centuries.

The guy shrugged his ham-hock-sized shoulders. “What hour is it? Which gate? Sometimes IDF, sometimes their mob, sometimes our mob.”

“Did you notice any pattern?”

“The south is more quiet. To the north: New Gate, Damascus, and Herod’s are Arab controlled. The Haredi fought over control of Damascus but gave up and joined with the Army trying to defend the Lion’s Gate, y’see?” Schlomo shrugged. “That didn’t go so good.”

It was Jewish West Jerusalem versus Arab East all over again. Schlomo slurped his brown beverage. David scowled at his own liter-sized cup. The man must have filled half of it with honey before splashing in some coffee.

“The civilians on both sides have a lot of weapons. Really. More than usual; stuff I’ve only seen in videos.”

“Anything else?”

“Sha’ar HaRahamim, the Golden Gate, is open.”

“What?”

“They had the most ferocious fight over the Lion’s Gate,” Schlomo said. “When the Arab fighters fell back, the IDF tanks came in. The insurgents blew the whole place up. In reality, they had been unsealing the Golden Gate all along. Makes sense; it leads right to the big mosques on the Mount.” Schlomo shrugged. “That’s how it was an hour ago. Now, who can say?”

“Thanks. If you need anything from the Army, just page my AI, Miss

Aleph. She's with a bunch of Americans here, you can't miss them. Tell her Baumann let you requisition anything."

The name seemed to strike a chord.

"Baumann, like the chief rabbi of Israel?"

He nodded. He got that all the time.

"Yeah, I see the resemblance now. Any relation to Lia Baumann?"

What?

Before David could grab the ambulance driver by his sweat-stained shoulders, he explained. His ZAKA van had met Lia and her friends as they drove into the city hours ago.

"They looked beat up," Schlomo said. "But your wife is cautious and smart. I took away the one who was worst off, Eitan."

Fuck! Eitan. David should have let him go back to Army headquarters.

"What about him? Can I talk to him?"

The ZAKA man shook his head. "He'll be in surgery for a while. I don't know if he'll ever play the violin again, but they're doing their best to reattach his arm."

Schlomo delicately chewed his sandwich. It must have been prepared in a hurry by Hadassah's cafeteria or local volunteers. He stopped eating briefly to remove a chicken bone from his mouth.

"That reminds me, there was a rumor the two sides were going to talk at the Western Wall. Your father and the sheikh of Jerusalem. Maybe they can arrange a cease-fire. This crazy shit has got to stop."

"He can't go up on the Mount," David said.

His father had always upheld the tradition that observant Jews could not visit the Temple Mount because they might step on the Holy of Holies without being purified in the biblical manner. It was one tradition that kept hostilities from breaking out between Muslims who were in control of the Temple Mount and Jews who saw it as the site of their First and Second Temple before Islam even began as a religion.

“They were going to meet at the top of the Western Wall, on a crane or platform. Jerusalem’s rabbi tried already,” Schlomo said, shaking his head. “Someone threw him off the Mughrabi Bridge ramp. He broke his neck clean.” He made a snapping sound with his tongue. “I brought his remains here myself. The Haredi wanted it, but he was a government official. There has to be an autopsy.”

Just then, Mr. Kim came out of the emergency room doors.

“Hey boss, I found, uh, those things you asked for.”

“Good. Ready for your next assignment, Private Kim?” David pointed to the ambulance chief. “Schlomo, this guy is your new wingman. He’s Korean but speaks better Hebrew than you do English.”

“I’m not sure...”

“Of course you are. By the looks of what I cleaned up, you could use two more hands. Plus, I hear he makes great kimchi.”

“I thought I was going with you,” Kim protested.

“You saw how my last partner Atticus ended up. In this ambulance is where you can do the most good. Take your weapon, but keep it hidden and only shoot what Schlomo tells you. Remember what I told you?”

Kim nodded. “Use tracers to scare the bad guys when I miss.”

The Orthodox man and the Korean immigrant set out. Schlomo’s makeshift ZAKA ambulance weaved through the stream of incoming electric cars and mopeds laboring up Mount Scopus toward Hadassah; there was even a small figure inside a wooden cart being pulled by a donkey. It was silhouetted against the smoke-filled horizon, which was darkening from deep blue into impenetrable black; the tired animal brayed and shook its head and plodded on.

...

In Hadassah Medical, even the deceased were segregated.

Following Kim’s directions, David took a shortcut through a courtyard. A guard stood nervously outside the hospital’s synagogue. The stained-glass

windows in the wall above had a few holes in them and scorch marks from some small incendiary device that had been thrown, stuck, and burned through.

Muslim bodies were kept in the second of two mortuary levels. There was a separate reinforced elevator. In the past, bodies had come in with ticking bombs inside. His ID got him through the staff entrance, but there was a noisy crowd led by a crotchety-looking imam blocking the way into the morgue.

“We are coming in,” the Muslim cleric yelled at a small olive-skinned soldier. She seemed to be the only one assigned to this level. “They want to see if their sons and daughters have been killed in this mess the Israelis have let befall us.”

“No, please, sir, step back,” the diminutive woman said in perfect Arabic. “Back, please, to the white line.”

At first David thought the guard might be Bedouin or one of the few Israeli Arabs who risked joining the IDF; then he saw a five-pointed colored star tattoo on the back of her neck.

“Shalom,” David said. “I bet you wish you had volunteered for the Druze budget and finance division, huh?”

She saw the name and rank on the temporary badge he had gotten printed up.

“Sir!” The woman straightened up to about four-foot-eleven in combat boots.

She had an appropriately compact FN PS90 assault rifle secured behind her. It was in good configuration so as not to be easily grabbed by a lunatic in the crowd which had gathered outside the morgue. She also had a shock baton but wisely left it hanging on her belt. This was a closed, narrow hallway, and she had no backup.

Crowd control was an art as well as a martial science. The first time David had been attacked while on duty with the IDF was during an urban patrol. A

drunken Palestinian in the city of Lod had started in on him. Even after a groin kick and punch to the head, the peckerhead came back at him with a weapon. David reached for his pistol. His sergeant jumped in and covered his hand.

“Knife!” David yelled at his superior.

“It’s only a tiny one,” the older soldier said, stomping on the guy’s arm. “A box cutter.”

“Still, it’s a deadly assault on uniformed security.”

“Are you bleeding?”

David had checked himself, shook his head.

“Okay then, take his knife and take him home.”

“What if he had cut me?” David asked, outraged. He had been in fights before, but this was a wild, thrashing, dusty affair. Having grown up in the rabbi’s house, he took the disorderliness of it personally.

“Then we’d have had a chat with him in that alley,” the officer said. “And instead of to his house, you’d be taking him to a hospital with a broken arm.”

“What if he’d killed me?”

“I’d feel bad. I’d even attend shiva, as long as the food was good,” his old sergeant had said. “Private Baumann, if you let yourself get killed by a shicker fifty pounds lighter than you who has only two inches of steel, how good would you be at stopping a Hezbollah suicide bomber from blowing up a school bus?”

Not very, David had to admit.

“Now pick him up and go,” his commander had said. “If he pukes in the jeep, you’re cleaning it.”

That day he learned the danger was not the person with a small blade; it was the fifty people with stones and iron rods watching, ready for an excuse to be the inciting spark of a riot.

This girl holding the crowd back from the morgue doors was keeping her cool, but she needed help. Her tag read Corporal Mishlab.

“You’re Druze.”

The main ethnic divisions among Israeli citizens were Jewish, Arab, Druze, and Circassian.

“How’d you know?”

“You’re all tiny and hot looking. They say the exchange rate is three Druze girls to a camel.”

“Sorry, I didn’t recognize you,” she spoke softly in Hebrew and smiled. “Major Dickhead.”

At least his joke got her mind off the possibility of the mob stomping her to death on the dirty wet floor outside the morgue.

Even secular Jews tended not to get tattoos. The five-star design was a dead giveaway of her ethnicity. Druze considered themselves Muslims, yet they got hate from both Shi’a and Sunni. They were the only non-Jewish group included in compulsory IDF service.

“Corporal, I’m going to settle some things with the gentleman cleric here. Do you know life-sign triage procedure?”

She did.

David turned to the imam at the head of the impatient crowd. “Sir, a word, please.”

“We need to find out who you have in there!” the cleric said demanding. “We have a right to know who of our people is alive or dead.”

“Honored elder,” David said in his best Palestinian Arabic. “Hadassah has always treated people equally, regardless of ethnic or religious difference. You agree?”

He could not disagree. Hadassah was the only medical center that had ever been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

“I’m going to do something for two minutes,” David said politely but in his checkpoint-firm voice. “After that, the corporal will go in there and check every single body for any life signs.”

“But we—”

David switched to formal Arabic:

“For this reason, we have ordained for the Children of Israel that... whoever saves a life, it is as though he had saved the lives of all men.”

David was quoting the Quran. Silently, he thanked the rabbi for pounding at least that much into his thick skull.

“Honored imam, up there.” David motioned to the upper floors. “The emergency intake doctors are in a hurry. I have seen mistakes happen. If we have a chance to save even one person, isn’t that worth maintaining calm here?”

“Inshallah,” the imam agreed.

David entered the morgue; it had a much more peaceful atmosphere.

His breath misted in the cold air. They had turned the temperature way down. Occupancy was “standing room only,” so to speak. The freezer-cold, dank air smelled like harsh cleanser and every body odor imaginable.

“Okay,” he said to the rows of stacked corpses. “Let’s see who’s been a naughty boy.”

Modern body bags were double sealed and engineered for maximum biohazard containment. Normal disease vectors tended not to survive their hosts very long, though cholera could infect a water supply. The IDF remains containment units also took into account bioweapons. Pathogens such as anthrax and self-propagating nerve agents had been engineered to replicate themselves by feeding on dead flesh before jumping to live humans.

The fridge units had filled up fast. They had run out of bio-bags. Some deceased were wrapped only in blue plastic sheets. Overflow guests had been placed on stackable gurneys that looked like shelves in the world’s most gruesome library.

David walked the narrow spaces between them. Small noises came from the left. Metallic creaking came from near the floor as overstressed support brackets strained to hold the dead weight above. He bent down, hoping the stack would not collapse at the worst possible...

“Don’t be alarmed, Dave.”

“Gah!” David jerked up and thumped his head on a head.

“They are only dead bodies.”

The stack of bodies to his right swayed dangerously, threatening to fall on him. He steadied it with his arm until it stayed up.

“*Ben-zona bat-zona*,” David cursed at his borrowed handset. She must have opened a channel. “Miss Aleph, why are you interrupting?”

“I was just testing the comm link patch through to your rather sad and outdated handset.” Then Miss Aleph added hopefully, “I’m nearly fully charged.”

“You mean nearly full of shit.”

“All right, twenty-one percent.”

“I’ll stick with the loaner. I’m busy.”

“I thought you could use some company. Your handset registers your pulse and galvanic skin response. You seem stressed.”

“Is there any more intel about the Old City?”

“Not much more than what the ambulance driver told you.”

She was always listening. AIs were equally comforting and creepy.

“Jewish and allied forces are in the Western Wall Plaza. Hostile forces, presumably led by the Grey Wolves, have taken over the Temple Mount.”

“Numbers?”

“Best estimates, one hundred thousand. . .”

Zine beh-sechel, David cursed silently.

“. . .on each side. This may be low.

“A large number of hostile military-aged Palestinians have come in from the Mount of Olives area through the reopened Golden Gate. The gate had been sealed for centuries. There are no adequate cameras or sensors.”

The entire standing forces of the combined IDF were only 224,000 for the entire country. Reserves could be called up to triple that number, but that would take days. This war could be won or lost in hours.

“Efforts to disperse the Israeli crowds in the Old City have been unsuccessful due to reluctance on IDF’s part to use teargas on Jews because it might make them vulnerable to attack.

“The air force has refrained from bombing, strafing, or dropping robot paratroopers on the Palestinians who are in control of the Temple Mount because of standing orders not to damage Muslim holy places.

“And Dave. . .you’re alone, right?”

David looked at the corpse he had bumped his head on; it was charred and

earless.

“No one’s listening.”

“Some IDF units have shown a distinct lack of responsiveness to orders from Central Command. I suspect they have joined with ultra-Orthodox militia units.”

Great, IDF mutiny. Could it be worse?

“Another thing. . .”

“*What?*”

“Several Jewish wounded have come into Hadassah covered with a white flaky substance. At first they thought it was a chemical weapon. It was found to be ash containing cedarwood, wool, and genetically engineered bovine protein residue.”

Tum’at HaMet, the ritual purification required before ascending to the Mount. Factions bent on building the Third Temple had for decades been trying to clone a certain species of red heifer, one which had been extinct since the time of King Herod. That was the match that could set off a final Judeo-Islamic holy war, one that could set the globe on fire.

“Tell Corporal Singh I’ll need a ride soon.”

David grabbed headbands off dead bodies. On the sixth one, he found what he was looking for. On the front side was elegant Arabic calligraphy reading “Death to Israel”; on the reverse side was a grid with dates, times of day, and friend-foe pass phrases. Only a midlevel insurgent leader would have them. These would normally be memorized; this fellow had been lazy. They might help him get through Grey Wolves roadblocks.

“Are you coming to get me?”

“No.”

“Dave!”

“Say hi to Ms. Sato for me.”

“You know she likes Captain Atticus better than you, right?”

He switched off the handset and left the morgue.

Outside, there was shouting. People were angry. However, in this unlikely case, the tiny Druze soldier and the intense Muslim cleric were unified; everyone was annoyed with David.

“You took your time, Major, sir,” the Druze woman said as she outfitted volunteers—presumably with medical training—with gloves and gowns to

check the hundreds of bodies.

“We were about to barge in,” the imam said. “Every moment counts.”

“Agreed,” David said. “One life, right?”

“One life.”

David rushed out the way he’d come.

...

“Ah, Major Baumann,” Corporal Singh said without much enthusiasm from the cab of the truck. “Miss Aleph said you had need of our driving skills.”

Marwood the capuchin monkey was there. With his unbandaged hand, he played with a yin-yang-shaped dongle hanging from the rearview mirror.

David checked the engine and the exterior of the vehicle they had captured from the Belladonna electronic warfare crew. It was highly modified with run-flat tires and level-ten transparent aluminum glass.

“Corporal, you don’t look happy to see me.” Marwood flicked his beady eyes in David’s direction. “Neither of you do.”

“It’s just... ever since you joined our group, events have taken a turbulent turn.”

David scoffed. “You are from 3 Commando, British Royal Marines. You eat turbulent at midmorning tea.”

Singh still looked reluctant to get going.

“What is it?”

“Well, sir, they say *teen tigaada kaam bigaada*. A journey with only three is to be avoided, especially in times of strife and trouble.”

The Indian man looked at the hundreds of smoke pillars rising in the air over Jerusalem.

Now with the Hindu mysticism! David exhaled. As if this place didn’t have enough belief systems. He thought about the Tanakh, what would the rabbi say?

“Long ago, not far from here,” David said, “my ancestor Jacob wrestled the angel called Samael. He journeys and contends with all Jews to this very

day, trying to finish the match.”

Corporal Singh thought for a moment. “I know that parable. Didn’t Jacob win?”

“Samael gave his blessing, but would you expect an angel whose name means ‘Venom of God’ to ever give up?”

Corporal Singh, David, Marwood, and the Archangel Samael set off. Their truck rolled down Mount Scopus into the mist of a thin, unwholesome fog that blanketed the city.

**HADASSAH MEDICAL CENTER
JERUSALEM****ELLIE**

“I guess I’m with you now, Eleanor,” the disembodied, disaffected voice of Miss Aleph said.

Her battered case sat charging up in an electronics first-aid cubicle in the hallway of Hadassah Medical. Technicians on either side of her scrambled to save valuable pieces of technology. Miss Aleph sat beside an ambulance robot that was being treated for a bullet hole and burns.

“I’m sure Major Baumann will be back for you soon,” Ellie said as evenly as she could. She did not like appliances that spoke without being spoken to first. “And please call me Ellie.”

“Yes, Eleanor.”

David Baumann had disappeared into the lower levels of the hospital, and Ellie had a sinking feeling she might not see him again, possibly ever.

“I don’t need surgery,” Atticus protested. A harried intern stood over him, reading the American soldier’s chart, answering a page, and watching remote vital signs of his other patients on a thin flexible monitor screen mounted on his forearm.

“Triage regulations and the medbot say you do.” The Israeli started wheeling Atticus away down the chaotic hallway. “Rejoice, my American friend, you are about to receive the best trauma care in the world.”

“There are plenty of people worse off.”

Ellie thought he was probably afraid to be anesthetized and miss the rest of

the war.

Mr. Perdix blocked the gurney's path. "All he needs is a below-knee popliteal graft, preferably synthetic."

"Are you a surgeon?" the overworked doctor snapped.

"Much better, I'm a bioengineer."

"Out of the way or I'll call security. Unless you can grow this man a new foot, we have to—"

Mr. Perdix handed over a flexible scroll screen.

"From the hospital's director general. Stabilize Captain Atticus and then give us transport to the US embassy. That is all, Doctor."

The Hadassah physician snapped the electronic device shut and nodded. "Change of plan, Captain, your bioengineer's orders."

Mr. Perdix reeled off some scientific-sounding language as Atticus was wheeled down the hall, then he went over to the electronic repair ward and bent down.

"Miss Aleph, we may have gotten off on a wrong foot." He poked a bony finger at a young technician. "You there, get me a better replacement screen for this brave little AI."

Sarge Bryan came up beside Ellie. She declined his offer of a coffee.

"If DARPA treated me that good, I wouldn't have to go to Shanghai for optical upgrades." His eyes glowed as they surveyed the scene.

"What did Mr. Perdix mean? Are we headed out soon?"

"I don't think there's much 'we' about it," Sarge said.

"Oh, no," Ellie said, suddenly aware she was being dumped. "You're not stowing me away on the recharge stand."

Horrible shrieking cut her argument short. A patient writhed on a gurney as attendants struggled to keep him from falling off. His fireman's uniform was still smoking, one thick charred glove came off. Along with it went all the man's flesh below his elbow. The gout of gore slopped to the spotless floor. Boiled black ooze sloshed toward Ellie. Before it got to her, a service bot

started cleaning up the ghastly mess.

She kept a stiff upper Brit-Asian lip and concluded her thought. “As the sole representative of the United Kingdom on this expedition, I insist on seeing it through to the end.”

Sarge looked at Nobu, smiled with resignation, and said, “Now that you put it like that, let’s get you some gear that doesn’t smell like day-old diapers.”

That was relatively easy. Hadassah was a 2,000-bed complex that had emergency capacity for three times that number, not counting triage tents set up outside. The whole country of Israel seemed permanently geared up to face the next calamity. But was it up to this one?

Ellie’s worst fear was dozing off and the men sneaking away. Barely an hour and a half after their arrival, Atticus emerged. He had on a transparent cast and what looked like a squashed squid pumping blood from his upper leg to his foot.

“That’ll do,” Mr. Perdix said to the exhausted-looking orderly folding up the captain’s wheelchair.

“They’ve done a much better job on you, Miss Aleph,” Mr. Perdix said, overtly brown-nosing the Israeli AI. “Your new view screen positively shines.”

“The IDF values mechanical intelligence. We have much to teach you.”

Mr. Perdix put her in a belly pouch, which looked hilariously like the one kangaroos carried their young in.

Ellie sorted through her bag. Mr. Fendi would be aghast. The expensive burgundy leather looked like it had been used as a chew toy by a litter of bulldog puppies. Thankfully, she had paid the extra few quid for a hard pen case. Her retirement fund Namiki and even the strange Montblanc, which had let her rescuers trace her after her kidnapping by the PKK, were undamaged.

“What I really need is a camera,” she mumbled to herself.

“I’ve always thought myself suited to a career in journalism,” Miss Aleph said from Mr. Perdix’s tummy pouch.

Ellie's first thought was that it was not appropriate to talk about career options with an AI who belonged to someone else. Although asking if her owner approved might not be politically correct. So she said, "There's not great money in it, I'm afraid."

That sounded daft. What would Miss Aleph spend money on?

"I've read all your articles. You're very good. I consider myself freelance. I'll offer you all my nonclassified pictures and videos for the standard pixel rates."

This strange negotiation was interrupted when Atticus hobbled over on his madly high-tech leg cast.

"If our embedded correspondents are ready, we're OM to the nearest embassy of the US of A."

"Hooah!" Nobu, Sarge Bryan, and even Mr. Perdix, said in unison.

Outside, a wounded helicopter made a crash landing in an impossibly small grassy spot. The dust settled. Nothing exploded. Wounded people on stretchers came out of the wreck. Ellie and her group barely noticed. She felt she was getting her "war legs."

When they got to the motor pool, the dispatcher yelled at Miss Aleph in Hebrew.

"This putz won't let us have a marked vehicle. No armed people are allowed in Hadassah ambulances. It would violate neutrality they've tried to maintain since the 1930s."

From the bullet holes she saw in some of the disabled emergency vehicles, Ellie gathered not everyone appreciated the convention.

After some haggling and a quick inspection by Nobu, they settled on a small open-backed lorry. A roadside explosion had taken a big bite out of its side, and it was not useful for carrying casualties in or supplies out.

"All yours," the dispatcher said in broken English. He clearly doubted the welded-together wreck would make it down Mount Scopus.

They left Hadassah. Ellie looked down at Jerusalem. Haze veiled the sun as it fell toward the horizon. Random shots rang out.

Off in the distance, behind some buildings, an explosion went off; a puff of gray-brown smoke billowed. The effluent of war joined the dozens of oily

black contrails rising from the hundreds of buildings and thousands of homes. To Ellie, the city was like a brave whale stabbed through by many harpoons, its blood coming out in gouts to float up into the vast blueness of the darkening sky.

Feeling queasy she concluded her war legs would require further tempering.

Miss Aleph watched her through her new sensors.

“I’ve got a few nice shots of the medical center. War photography consistently wins Pulitzer prizes. Rules do not specifically exclude photographers who happen to be artificial people.”

The cramped interior of their battered lorry smelled like diesel fumes and rotting seat cushions. As they wound their way down the hill, they had to stop every few meters.

“This is gonna be a while,” Sarge said. “The American embassy is clear across town.”

Then it wasn’t.

As they paused on a promontory overlooking the city, a dozen explosions ruptured the skyline. Ellie thought she could see shock waves emanating from each one until they all blended into a distant roar. Far above, a jet streaked away. Lower down, a helicopter appeared but veered out of the way of the rising fireballs.

“Quick Reaction Radar on the hospital’s roof locates the center of those blasts as Talpiot district.”

“So?” said Nobu, who was at the wheel.

“That area of Jerusalem is known as embassy row.”

“Damn!” Atticus said. He shifted his cast-bound leg away from a hole, which had rusted through the truck floor.

“Boss?” Sarge sounded uncertain.

Their leader exhaled slowly. “Well, at least we weren’t near the embassy when they finally got round to blowing it up. Even if the staff is holed up in some underground bunkers, we’ll never get through the fighting and the rubble.”

Nobu hit the dash with his fist. The plastic cracked. “Damn!”

“How about the British embassy?” Ellie asked, trying to brighten the mood, which was threatening to veer into the Dunkirk-grim side of the spectrum.

“What can we do there?” Nobu asked. “Have tea until the war’s over?”

“Ms. Sato is right,” Mr. Perdix said in an unusually agreeable manner. “Here’s the address.”

Ellie tried not to look at the skyline or poor Capitan Atticus’s leg. Through the transparent parts of his cast, it looked like haggis that had gone well past its “use by” date.

After about a kilometer, the crowds going up Mount Scopus thinned. Their old lorry chugged its way down tree-lined avenues, which might have been located in any southern French town.

“This is Rajeib Street,” Mr. Perdix said. “Stop here.”

“The consulate’s a couple more blocks.”

“Right... the place with one hundred masked lunatics in front of it who have made barricades out of garbage bins and burning tires,” Mr. Perdix said much too drolly. “Sergeant, make sure there are no spotters or scouts from the mob. If there are, shoot them quietly.”

The DARPA scientist got out and walked over to a steel gate with a Templar red cross on a white banner stenciled on it. Behind that sat a stone wall and a modest estate that looked like dozens of others.

When they were all through, the gate silently eased itself closed. To Ellie, the odd thing was, the dusty vines and cobwebs seemed to rearrange themselves along the gate. The place had the ambiance of premeditated grungy neglect, as though keen on announcing that no one had been through in years.

Ellie and the men walked into the courtyard. An eerie quiet settled on them. In the middle was a stone fountain. Four round tiers dribbled delicious, clean-looking water into a basin. This hushed bucolic oasis of green was a planet removed from a city bent on mass murder. Ellie nearly relaxed.

“I wouldn’t lean on that,” Mr. Perdix warned as Ellie slouched against a garden shed.

“Or drink the water,” said a female voice from the shadows.

Everyone jumped a little, especially Nobu, who looked thirsty.

A thin, willowy tall woman emerged from a curtain of hanging vines. Her skin literally sparkled in an ominous way.

“I’ve just topped up my fountain’s ricin mixture.”

NEAR MOUNT SCOPUS

DAVID

“Keep to the main roads,” David said. “I don’t want us being shot at trying to get through narrow streets in the Arab district.”

“You’re navigating, boss,” Corporal Singh said. “I’m new in town.”

Marwood hunkered down on a scrap of burlap on the floor of the truck cab. The monkey was careful of his tail stump and newly sutured hand. The vehicle they were in had been used by the Belladonna electronic warfare crew to smuggle equipment into the Territories. It would pass as Israeli, which meant only half the city would be shooting at them.

Cautiously, they approached a checkpoint. It guarded national police headquarters at Kiryat Begin. David’s new IDF friend-foe codes got them through quickly.

“This morning they came at us pretty heavily from Sheikh Jarrah,” one of the officers told David as they passed through. “Around midday, they faded away. We were told not to pursue. Thought it might be a tactic to draw us into an ambush, sir.”

Approaching the roadblock, David had seen a football-field-sized scorch mark. Inside were small melted blobs that might have once been cars and a big metal blob that might have been a mainline battle tank.

“Good call,” David said. “My advice: Keep a four-hundred-meter

perimeter. If you see any drones, kill them fast even if they have IDF markers. My AI said there are reports of our drones being zombied to the enemy's network."

They passed through the barricades. David's phone was silent. He had only a vague notion where Lia and his father the rabbi were. The lack of fighting behind them was also ominous. There was only one place where all the Grey Wolves insurgents and their allies would have gone.

Farther down Kheil ha-Handasa Street, some jackwads had set a bus on fire and tried to make a roadblock. Hooded figures crouched behind low walls and burning tires.

"Just blow through it," David said, shooting a few times in the general direction of the scumbags. "That bus has been burning for hours. It's lost all of its fuel, most of its mass. It won't explode."

Corporal Singh gripped the steering wheel and accelerated. Marwood swung to a more secure perch.

"You did say this Samael is an angel of the guardian variety, did you not?"

They hit the back end of the overturned bus with a bump that rattled David's teeth. His hurt leg jammed into the side door. They went through in a shower of sparks.

"This time, yes. Let's not test him."

The only time they were seriously shot at was when they approached the Haredi enclave of Batei Ungarin.

Red Dawn tank traps had been activated at the intersections. It was obvious they were getting near a Jewish-controlled area. The graffiti changed from Arabic to Hebrew and Russian:

Jordan IS the Palestinian State.

Want peace?

Give MASSIVE deportation a chance!

On a broken highway separator, spray paint read:

WE ARE HERE & WE WILL NEVER LEAVE

It was in English. There was no telling which side had written it.

In addition to the official barriers, the local militias had added tire spikes and possibly a few land mines. As they approached a nasty cross-firing point, David held out the white-and-blue flag. Incoming rounds nearly blew his hand off.

“Cocksucker!” David yelled. “Pull over.”

Marwood shrieked as a bullet that had to be a fifty caliber hit the broad windshield. The modified kosher deli truck was equipped with transparent aluminum windows. They held up, but the flaming eruption that accompanied the bullet impact covered the glass in black soot. Visibility was zero.

“Where?”

More bullets hit. The glass became so cracked and fractured they could only see through a few inches at the top and bottom.

“There.”

Soot and fractured laminate had turned Corporal Singh’s side totally opaque.

“Where?”

David yanked the wheel. They drove into a corrugated metal fence. Behind this was a yard surrounded by a brick wall. David shouldered the door open.

“Out, out, out.”

The friendly fire from the Orthodox Jews protecting their neighborhood might include antitank rockets. They had to get clear until they could talk to them.

As they crashed through, David looked out. The yard was not empty. A boy and two younger girls were gathering chickens. They were dressed in clothes out of a Russian folk tale. Haredi organized their communities and lifestyles after Jewish villages of the late 1800s. Tsarist Russia was alive and living in Jerusalem.

“*Tu das nisht!*” David yelled.

The boy just stood there holding two chickens, one under each arm. The smaller of the two girls had a lever action rifle.

"Ikh bin eydish," David pleaded.

"Put the gun down, Milka," the boy said in perfect English. "No terrorist would try to get away with speaking Yiddish that badly."

David had to act quickly. The main group of Jewish militia would think Arabs had their children hostage. These three had obviously been sent to gather luncheon birds for the hungry warriors manning the roadblock. In their haste and fury, they might shoot their own children.

David did the only thing he could. He raised the small Hadassah Israeli flag, which now had a ragged bullet hole in it. After a bit of yelling over the barricade, and thankfully no gunfire, the Orthodox militia sent a volunteer across the street.

"Hi." David introduced himself to a boy not much older than the chicken wranglers. "I see the old geezers sent you out."

The two girls were mesmerized by Corporal Singh in his turban and the battered Marwood. The truck's armor had saved them, but as a form of transport, it was finished. They ran to the Haredi enclave behind the street barricades.

Once inside the kitchen command center of the neighborhood, the chickens were killed in the approved method. David declined the group's offer of a home-cooked meal.

"There is, however, a mitzvah you can do for me."

"If you ask as a Jew, it's done," said a stern-looking white beard. "But not for the secular state. The Knesset can go straight to Gehenna."

A younger tough guy with a machine gun on his back laughed. His name was Shimon.

David asked them for transport. He had to get moving, alone. "A motorbike would be ideal."

Shimon smiled sagely. "A chateau on the French Riviera and a flying car

to take me there would be ideal.” He motioned to a silent man by the doorway. “See what we have.”

Shimon sat back down at a table filled with knives, everything from a hook-bladed palm knife to a poleaxe on a telescoping stock. They had been busy.

Unlike in other countries, in Israel, strictly Orthodox Jewish men tended not to participate in the secular work force. Many Haredi volunteers were teachers and disaster relief workers. His father was largely responsible for the huge growth of Orthodox Judaism.

Rabbi Baumann had been concerned about the rising rigidity of life in Haredi communities: the prohibition on women driving, the lack of general education for children other than Torah or homemaking studies. His mission was to give girls and boys as equal an education as possible, to allow for inclusion of books by Archimedes and Einstein, and even to permit limited use of computers after religious studies were done for the day.

David’s father had toiled in vain for years, telling everyone who would listen that most of the great rabbis in the Gemara had other jobs. Every time he made progress, some coalition-breaking argument about the Tal Law exempting yeshiva students from military service would erupt in the Knesset. Rabbi Baumann’s breakthrough came when he was called to Hadassah Hospital to counsel a man in his thirties who had seemingly tried to kill himself by running his car into a mountainside.

The unfortunate young man was Abel Levin Jr., son of a very famous Orthodox petrochemical engineer. Levin Sr. had died the previous year, and Abel was distraught at his poor relations with his father. Rabbi Baumann listened with sympathy and, as he would later tell the tale to his family, including David, tried to make no judgments. He did, however, take Abel to Mea She’arim, where the senior Mr. Levin had grown up. It was Purim, so the place was a bit chaotic, with pre-teens smoking cigarettes on every corner.

A week later, Abel was cleared to leave the hospital by the psychiatrists. The rabbi told him his door was always open and gave him his own copy of *Chassidic Pearls*. “And what do you know,” when recounting the story David’s father would say, “the poor fellow went to London, rented the most fabulous penthouse on High Street, and on his first night there, hung himself.”

In his will, Abel Levin Jr. had left Rabbi Baumann all the shares in a company which revolutionized offshore gas well fracking worldwide. As atonement for his sinful life and ignominious death, Abel asked it be used to benefit the Orthodox community in Israel, which he could never be part of.

Israel’s minister of energy suddenly became the rabbi’s best friend. Israel had offshore gas reserves, the Leviathan gas fields. Levin’s new technology increased reserves by orders of magnitude. Additionally, the worldwide royalties flowing into the company were astonishing. The question was how best to use the money.

Rabbi Baumann believed the future of Israel was democratic and religious, not secular. To people who did not want to hear that, he showed demographic and political projections. To the people who still scoffed, he said, “There are all kinds of Jews: black, Asian, Hispanic, Mizrahi, Ashkenazi, and all shades in between; if they are not connected by Jewish religious teachings, what does connect them?”

The real struggle was getting the Haredi to tolerate the state on the one hand and the minority of secular citizens to accept growing religious populations. Privately, he and his constant companion Rabbi Toledano worried that a purely secular Israel could not long withstand the threats of rising fanaticism and Islamic imperialism, which demanded yet another Muslim Arab state from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea.

The Levin bequest funded the Ba’al Teshuva Torat Chayim organizations with tens of billions of shekels, dollars, euros, and cyber credits, all matched by government money, except for Chabad and a few others who always

refused assistance from the state.

In a wave of Aliyah immigration not seen since the 1940s, the last decade had seen hundreds of thousands of Jewish families flee the pernicious tide of anti-Semitism rising in Europe, particularly France and the UK. Orthodox communities were thriving all over Israel like never before.

Baumann and Toledano, who were members of the moderate Torat Chayim organizations, tried to build bridges between secular Israelis and religious extremists. Rabbi Baumann's financial and spiritual power had led to a seat in the cabinet beside the prime minister.

"David," his father had said once, "like a muscle—either you exercise the power you have or it won't be there when you need it to do good. This is how we will fight for the soul of Judaism while not neglecting its body or its mind."

Rabbi Baumann had convinced most Orthodox leaders to support military service and vocational training for families with at least two sons in yeshiva school. Many new immigrants also took up the offers of free housing and communal allowances. They had also entered the army and formed local militias. Many of the newcomers from Europe were not used to being bombed by hundreds of rockets from Gaza, Syria, and Lebanon; they took the assaults personally.

David looked around the heavily armed encampment. Had his father spawned a movement that was out of anyone's control?

David could see these men were no pacifists. Their Tavor assault weapons were fresh out of the packing crates. Judging by the accuracy of the bullets that hit his windshield, they had taken long breaks from kollel school to train at local weapons ranges with off-duty Sayeret Matkal special forces.

His hosts had "*Chazak ve'ematz*" embroidered in blue thread on small white pieces of cloth. *Be strong and of good courage*. This was a different Jewish battle exhortation than the one David was used to. In the IDF it was "*acharii*." That meant "follow me."

These men were not nebbish diamond merchants toddling along the streets of Antwerp. They were the inheritors of the tanned, tough pioneers who carved Israel out of the British Mandate. They were the deadly lions of Judah.

These warriors were the inheritors of the defenders at Masada. They had in them the same fire as the Jewish rebels who in 66 CE ambushed the Roman Twelfth Legion, took their eagle, and left none of the 6,000 legionnaires alive. The Battle of Beth Horon was one of the worst defeats the Empire ever suffered.

David looked at the steel in the eyes of the militiamen. They were ready to fight for their vision of Greater Israel and were not hindered by an ounce of secular mercy. The Grey Wolves should be worried. Maybe they all should be.

He could stay and help them; the IDF was formed to defend these people. Before the next sunrise, many would be dead.

“I know you are a secular guy,” Shimon said, as though reading his thoughts.

The table they sat at was covered with fifty knives and short swords. David grunted. He was tired and hurt. Was there anything he could do about Boaz? Lia said she was headed into the Old City. Maybe sticking with this group was his best chance of finding her.

“We are not all religious here either,” the bearded militiaman said, pointing to the rest of the men in the room and in the courtyard. “There are atheist Zionists.”

A serious-looking clean-shaven man who was oiling a multiple-tube rocket launcher shrugged. “We secular Zionists are in favor of a Jewish state. We are just against a halachic state. We like to use electricity every day of the week.”

The bearded man continued, “We even have with us a Druze or two. Other militia units allow women to fight with them. But we all have one idea that is absolute: Tonight the Jewish nation will retake the Temple Mount. This Aga

Temir, the Grey Wolves, or anyone else who tries to stop us, will die.”

76

JAFFA GATE OLD CITY JERUSALEM

LIA

“You heard from David?” Rabbi Baumann asked eagerly.

Lia had to confess it had only been one word.

David’s father seemed distracted. Like he wanted to say or ask something more but dared not. General Behar’s command post was teeming with people, many wearing black Shin Bet tactical gear.

“We can only wait,” he finally said. “Wait and hope for a safe reunion.”

Rabbi Baumann looked calm for someone planning to go up to the Temple Mount where there were more than a hundred thousand people who wanted to kill him. Lia made a brief report to General Behar of what she had encountered on her way from Tel Aviv.

“What about my civilians?” Lia asked.

Her parents, Spencer, and Steph were getting hot soup. The white peaks of the relief tents grew long gray shadows as the sun set.

“They’re probably safer with us than anywhere else,” Behar said with unusual candor for a senior officer. “It’s like this all over. Or worse.”

“Who are the Grey Wolves? Where did they come from? How could they have risen so quickly?”

Behar shook his head. “That’s for Mossad and Shin Bet to figure out. I’m

worried about containment. I have to save government infrastructure: parliament, security organizations, civil administration. All else we can rebuild, but if we lose national cohesion... there won't be a State of Israel for the IDF to protect."

Behar gave a thumbs-up to one of his tank commanders as he ran past to get to his war beast. Also near the mess tent were the Orthodox militiamen. Jehdeiah was preparing to move out alongside the regular IDF soldiers from Jaffa Gate toward the Western Wall Plaza.

Behar looked them over. "What do you think of them?"

Lia thought for a second.

"They have a narrow skill set. More destructive than organized." She had heard other Jewish militia units were supposed to be active in the Old City. "Are there many of them?"

Behar sighed. "More than I have troops at the moment. Can we trust them?"

"They're borderline fanatics. From all walks of Israeli life. Some are secular Zionists, some reformed Orthodox, many are ultra-Orthodox who've been preparing for this fight all their lives. I think they will keep their word."

"That would be a nice change," the general said, stashing papers in pouches which looked like saddlebags draped over the back of his personal robot transport. "I'd hate to be caught between them and the Grey Wolves tonight."

An IDF LLAMA utility robot got up on its four legs. It was nearly as tall as a horse. After stretching, the mechanical pack animal led the way out of the command tent. Lia walked beside the general, heading for the Western Wall.

She recognized the way they were going; so did her father.

"The long way, Rabbi?" Mr. Suleiman asked.

"It's best we go through the Armenian Quarter," Rabbi Baumann said.

The large tanks would not fit through narrow stone-lined streets. All the

heavy vehicles exited Jaffa Gate and took the alternative route through the modern city to the Western Wall Plaza. Lia stared after all the departing firepower.

“Why we are risking these narrow old streets on foot?” General Behar asked rhetorically. “Ask your father-in-law.”

“I didn’t say you had to come with me,” Rabbi Baumann said. “This is the city King David captured from the Jebusites three thousand years ago. They will know we’re coming to talk peace, but they must also know we are not going anywhere.”

Their strange convoy would have to travel more than twice the direct distance, much of it through tunnels passable by only one car at a time. An electric jeep about the size of a golf cart came past. It had only the driver. Lia stopped him.

“Hey, Corporal,” she ordered. “I’ve got civilian VIPs. You’re walking.” Lia’s mother, Spencer, and Steph got in.

“If Rabbi Baumann is going to walk, so am I,” her father said.

He was firm on that. “This may be the last time I walk in Jerusalem, old city or new.”

Lia’s mother scoffed. “He’s always talking about moving to Argentina to live on your uncle Aaron’s ranch.”

“After this war, we have to go to Argentina,” Mr. Suleiman said, taking a sip from a canteen. “Even if our house is among those left standing. At least for a long visit. Aaron says in Argentina you can ride a horse for days.”

“Let’s hope they have a stepladder,” Lia’s mother said, shaking her head wearily. “That’s the only way you’re going to even get on a horse. ‘Ride a horse for days’ he says.”

Mr. Suleiman was adamant. “In Argentina, they think Arabs are cool.”

After they passed Zion Gate, her father started limping in earnest. Without a word, he got in the empty seat of the jeep. Lia saw Jehdeiah ahead. She honked a few soldiers out of the way and caught up with him.

“Hey, *achi*,” she called out, using slang meaning “bro.” “What do you hear?”

The muscular Jewish militia leader kicked a stone. “The old general was right. All of our people showed up and there was heavy fighting in the middle of the city. We managed to hold the Jewish Quarter and have a pretty secure command post in the Cardo.”

“And the Temple?”

Jehdeiah grimaced. “I’m told they opened the Golden Gate and were able to rush directly onto the Mount. We had no time to seize it. They’ve blocked all the entrances. You saw what they did to Rabbi Steinholtz.”

Lia kept pace with him as their vehicle’s tires thumped over the rough cobblestones.

“Now that the Islamic Waqf’s sheikh is up there, it’ll be different,” Lia said, hoping the militia would see reason so the IDF could restore order. “General Behar said the Palestinians are holding the murderers and offered to execute them on the spot. They’ll face an Israeli criminal court when this is over. We can settle our difference in other ways.”

“Right,” Jehdeiah said bitterly. “We can take them, still. They’ll never use their super weapons around the Al-Aqsa and the Dome.”

“You gave your word to the general.”

“Yes, and we’ll keep it but... we’re so close. In 1967, we pushed the murderous Jordanians out and took back East Jerusalem and the Mount. Then the next day, what did Moshe Dayan do? He handed the Mount back to the Waqf dog humpers. Even when we win, it feels like fucking surrender.”

Lia drove away before she said something that would endanger the accord. She thought about Eitan’s missing arm and all the dead soldiers and civilians. Her foot tensed on the accelerator. The open electric jeep zipped away, and she steered hard around a bend.

“Lia!” Steph said. “Is there a speed limit here?”

Lia slowed down.

There was still light in the sky when they passed the modern turnstiles into Western Wall Plaza. The bulk of Behar's forces were already there. With one interesting addition. The biggest land vehicle she had ever seen was parked near Mughrabi Bridge.

Rabbi Baumann met up with a blond Shin Bet man.

"This is Eli Weissach," the rabbi said. "He's from the prime minister's personal bodyguards."

Eli looked at her. At first, she thought he was angry. He had a look of determined methodical violence, like a border guard getting ready to shoot someone. Then she decided that was simply Mr. Weissach's normal expression.

"I've heard of you," Eli said. "You're the best female programmer in the IDF. I've met your husband many times."

Weirdly, he shook her hand and gave her a half hug. She guessed he was possibly really a sweetheart who just looked like a psycho.

"The rabbi has asked me to take care of your group," Eli said. He ushered them to a line of IDF vehicles.

The plaza in front of the Western Wall was big, about twenty thousand square meters. Normally filled with tourists and observant Jews, it lay completely empty of the living. In the middle the militiamen had overturned a cement truck; maybe they had thought to use it as a staging point for an assault up onto the fortresslike Temple Mount. Burn marks, cinders, and what looked like desiccated bodies blown to the corners of the plaza like dry leaves were the only traces of those attempts. Jehdeiah's militia took positions opposite the Wall where there were shops, hotels, and residences.

"What now?" Lia asked her father-in-law.

The chief rabbi shrugged his wide shoulders. "I meet the sheikh. We talk cease-fire. I try to not get killed. The usual."

He pointed to a platform standing by the Western Wall. It was a scissor lift sixty feet high which had been taken from a preservation and maintenance

site.

“*Chazak u'varuch*,” she said.

The rabbi laughed softly. “I will, daughter. *Chazak ve'ematz*.”

He walked out into the open plaza to make peace under the hateful stares of thousands of armed men.

“Mrs. Baumann,” Eli said, “you better get back to cover.”

“First off,” Lia said, her head spinning with the almost electrical energy flowing through the plaza, “I’m Lieutenant Baumann. You are not in my IDF chain of command, and I’ll decide where we’re safest.”

For a moment, it looked like the solidly built man was going to argue. Then he gave her a thin smile and nodded.

“He’s your father-in-law. I get it,” Eli said, handing her a pair of advanced binoculars. “You really should get behind cover.”

Lia got them all safely through a double-ringed cordon. The outer line was made up of APCs. Inside those were a dozen Merkava XIs. In the center of the IDF formation was the odd-shaped behemoth she had noticed earlier. It had twin sets of treads and no markings. Flamethrower and machine cannon turrets sprouted from its blue-black hide.

“I’ll be inside if you need anything.”

At first, Lia thought the prime minister might be in the mystery vehicle. It was three times the size of a normal battle tank. They must have dismantled part of the Moroccan Gate to even get it through the city walls and into the plaza. Its seamless armor looked like it might even give one of those super thermite bombs a run for its money.

As the door opened, Lia saw the only visible marking. Laser engraved on the inside of the doorframe was:



The symbol stood for Tēṭ, short for “ṭumah,” meaning unclean or impure.

In the military, it denoted biological and nuclear weapons.

**BRITISH CONSULATE ANNEX
JERUSALEM****ELLIE**

For a moment, Ellie thought this strange person was wearing glitter makeup on her skin. She had said “ricin,” which sounded familiar. Was it a breakfast cereal?

“Oh, hello,” Ellie said and waved to her.

Getting a closer look, it was apparent the glitter was *in* the unexpected woman’s skin. Her willowy form had emerged through the hanging fronds covering a tool shed on the far side of the garden. Ellie had seen gold-and-silver tattoos on fashion models. However, none had ever been so finely detailed and all over every inch of exposed skin, including lips and eyelids.

“You made it out,” Mr. Perdix said to their host. He turned to Ellie and the others; he looked like an embarrassed schoolboy with his pale skin blushing as much as it seemed able. “This is my favorite colleague in the world, Ms. China.”

Mr. Perdix introduced Atticus, Nobu, Sarge Bryan, and Ellie. Ms. China gave them a swift inspection. She paused only to stare at the tall African albino’s glowing blue eyes with a combination of wariness and jealousy.

“She’s my opposite number in DSTL,” Mr. Perdix said. “Defense Science and Technology Laboratory. It’s the British version of DARPA. She’s

probably kidding about the poison.”

The woman’s sparkly lips curled. “Take a sip. I think we packed the antidote. Somewhere.”

Ellie noticed her flat accent and pegged her as Scottish but educated in the south.

“Let’s get inside,” Sarge said, studying the sky. “The insurgents have some pretty sophisticated drones.”

The greenhouse roof was so overgrown with moss that not a patch of darkening blue sky could be seen. Ellie suspected it was stage moss or trained vegetation like the vines at the gate.

Atticus blocked Mr. Perdix’s path.

“You knew the US embassy was evacuated,” he said sharply. “Even before we left Hadassah. At the first excuse, you just happened to suggest we come here.”

The corner of Mr. Perdix’s mouth twitched. Then he confessed.

“If we were captured, I couldn’t risk the British safe house being compromised.” He pulled a clear capsule from under his shirt collar. “I only have one of these.”

Ellie gasped. “Is that a…”

“Suicide pill?” Mr. Perdix said. “Of course not; DARPA does not score own goals. When swallowed, it erases about twenty-four hours of memory.”

Ms. China laughed with the sound of well-oiled shears decapitating a rosebud.

“You don’t know how many Sunday afternoons I’ve had to use one of those.”

Ellie saw she had actually tattooed the whites of her eyes as well. Flicking her six irises toward the cellar, Ms. China beckoned them to follow her.

“C’mon down. It’s not very crowded. Most of the English are still down the street reenacting the siege of the Alamo.”

She pulled aside a false shelf filled with broken pots. Inside, things got

much more secret-lair-like. Two British soldiers with bayonets on their rifles looked them over, then let them pass.

“There’s a tunnel from the British consulate to this safe house. I’ve been telling them if one of those overpressure bombs comes through a window over there...” Ms. China made a remarkable vocal effect with a sizzle sound at the end.

One side of the secret room was filled to the low ceiling with rugged square plastic packing cases. They had US flags on them.

“You managed to save some of my stuff,” Mr. Perdix said.

“Most of the items you mentioned, Augustine Aloysius. I also grabbed some other things that looked interesting. The Americans were in a right hurry to leave their embassy.”

Ellie mouthed *Augustine Aloysius?* to Atticus. No wonder he insisted everyone call him Mr. Perdix.

“Say,” Atticus said, “I don’t imagine the tunnel goes all the way across town to our embassy. How did you get out with all this equipment?”

She smiled like a cat; golden stitches of ink lines curled around Ms. China’s dimples.

“The poop van,” she said. “A few months ago the Americans upgraded their escape vehicles to the Dongfeng extra-capacity self-driving sewage trucks.”

American diplomats sneaking out of the Jerusalem embassy via sewage trucks? Ellie’s editor would love details like that.

“There’s no driver, so no one to shoot. When the bad guys passed by, it pulled over to the curb. The whole truck tilted right over like it was wrecked and started oozing foul burning fluids. Flambé of shite. No one looked at us twice.”

“So they let you pass because they thought you were just full of shit?” Nobu asked.

“Isn’t that the American way?” She chortled.

“Wouldn’t it be safer for the Americans to go to the bunkers at the Israeli Parliament?” Ellie asked; she could read a map as well as any super spy.

Ms. China and Mr. Perdix exchanged looks.

“It might,” she said. “But there was a little conflict of interest.”

Before Ellie could ask a follow-up question, Ms. China walked up to within a few millimeters of Sarge Bryan.

“You’re *not* one of ours.”

Sarge just smiled, his cyber eyes rolling in Atticus’s direction.

Mr. Perdix had been pacing back and forth, studying their hostess. “You’re still too smug. I’ve been out of touch leading the rescue of Ms. Sato for a few days. Something very interesting is going on, otherwise you would not be here. C’mon, Ms. China, out with it.”

“Oh, all right,” she said as though unwrapping the best present ever. “You know the biogenic Armageddon we’ve been waiting on? It is about to happen... and we’re going to be right in the middle of it!”

**BATEI UNGARIN NEIGHBORHOOD
JERUSALEM****DAVID**

Shimon looked at David.

“We have different beliefs, but you and I have the *brit damim*, ‘a covenant of blood.’” The Orthodox militia leader used a term usually applied to the military fellowship between Jews and Druze. Shimon might not consider David and non-religious Jews to be real Jews; nevertheless, he said, “When this next thing happens, we will be on the same side.”

For years Mossad had reports of Orthodox young men being exempted from strict observance. They were sent to train with the deadliest Special Forces worldwide: Navy SEALs, British SAS, French Foreign Legion, and Russian Spetsnaz. No one in the government had ever tried to stop them. With the increased worldwide attacks on people who openly lived as Jews, the Haredi’s increased emphasis on security was understandable. As cabinet minister, Miri Drach even allowed them to use money from Rabbi Baumann’s national trust fund for these purposes.

The last Intelligence Directorate memo David had read on the subject reported that external security was having trouble monitoring the paramilitary members’ locations and was unable to determine their ultimate goal. Those were no longer mysteries. They were all here in Israel, and their goal was to

take the Temple Mount from the Muslims and build the Third Temple.

David sipped water and quietly decided. His *brit damim* meant finding his wife and father. It meant stopping his brother from whatever madness possessed him, if he could be stopped. It meant rescuing whatever remained for the State of Israel, if it could be saved.

“Wake up, ” Shimon said, joyfully slamming the point of a bayonet into a piece of wood to test it. “It is the Jewish year 5789. Eretz-Israel was really founded thousands of years ago when Joshua heard the Words of Promise. Shema Yisrael!”

The other militiamen took up the cry.

“Shema Yisrael!”

Now David knew how Lia felt at all-Jewish gatherings when she was the only Arab for kilometers. He was really out of place.

“Look, ” Shimon said. “I follow Reb Chaim Volozhin’s true teachings.” He pointed to his comrade in a red kippa with his locks tied back. “Ben follows that holy, but misguided, Rabbi Shneur Zalman. We’ve had many arguments. But we and you are People of the Book. There’s a place for you alongside us.”

David looked at their weapons. They had special melee devices, sharp, flesh piercing, ready to rip and tear through everyone in the city who stood in their way. This was a perfect storm of aggression: heavily armed fanatical Zionists teamed up with determined religious fanatics. Between shooting wars with Arabs, Jewish factions were happy to fight among each other: Orthodox got into scuffles with police and gay activists, hilltop settlers clashed with the Army, and Lehava segregationists had a stone for nearly everyone. The Grey Wolves’ attack had brought them all together.

“Those are some very interesting ideas you have,” David said, taking his last sip of water, wiping the rim of the cup before setting it on the embroidered cloth covering an antique table. “I shall think about them.”

And try my best to make sure they never ever happen.

At the other end of the table was a bearded guy named Elokim. He was clearly familiar with sharpening hallaf knives used for kosher killing. The knife had to be free of the slightest nick or imperfection. A laser tool aided modern shochets to check the edge after every kill. He was using the device to hone the edge of a khopesh sickle-sword. The design had been decapitating and eviscerating people in this region for thousands of years. This one had a high-tech carbon-fiber blade, which could probably defeat a soft ballistic vest.

Without looking up from his work, the young practical-minded guy asked, “You’ve been out there, in the action. I take it this isn’t our dads’ intifada?”

David quickly told them what he knew for sure about the Grey Wolves’ tactics and weapons. It was the least he could do.

“Schmegegge,” Elokim exclaimed. “A hundred-yard kill zone with something the size of a soccer ball?”

“It’s true,” David said, adding hopefully. “But I think Grey Wolves are not likely to use them inside the Old City. Too much chance of collateral damage to mosques and the Muslim quarter.”

“If they have discipline,” Shimon said.

“I heard from a Shin Bet guy who was at the Cardo in the City,” Elokim said. “They think the big leader is going to show up at the Temple Mount tonight.”

“The Waqf sheikh?”

“No, the leader of the Grey Wolves. The one they call Aga Temir.”

“Good,” Shimon boasted. “We’ll add his pelt to the fire.”

“You said these things don’t always detonate.”

“Not on time,” David said, repeating something Loeb had said back in Hebron. “Another reason they won’t use them. If they throw one and it doesn’t go off, it can be thrown back or will blow up in the Grey Wolves’ faces when they move forward.”

David also knew IDF armored divisions would soon learn to remain

dispersed to counter the threat. The advantages the enemy enjoyed using wide-band jamming and the poor man's surface-to-air weapons he saw around Shuafat would not last long.

"We will have air supremacy back soon," David said. "Use chemlights from your Red Dawn equipment to mark your positions. Otherwise IDF units might turn you into kosher Swiss cheese."

The Haredi militiamen thought that was funny. It was time to go. However, two members of David's party could not come with him.

"On the Foundation Stone *Even ha-Shtiyya* itself, I ask you please give my brave, wounded friend all your hospitality as though he were one of us," David said formally. "He has seen me steadfastly through battle and journey and suffered injury to defend Israel." David picked up Marwood. "And take in Corporal Singh too, if you have room."

The two girls they had first encountered were Milka and her sister, Lora. They were charged with care of the wounded monkey soldier.

David climbed to the highest point of the stronghold and looked out at the skyline. The sun glowed red through the haze. Its rays reflected off the pure gold Dome of the Rock about a mile away. The British-Indian soldier came up beside him.

"You're going on? With only Samael?"

David shrugged. "I've got to infiltrate the Old City, Corporal Singh. Give my best to Atticus and everyone when you meet them."

He went downstairs. From behind a canopy, he heard water splashing. A purification mikveh bath. On a table was a chalice topped by two gold angels, their wings touching. Inside, he knew he would find the burned essence of a sacred red heifer, the ash that Miss Aleph had mentioned back at Hadassah. The Jewish militiamen were purifying themselves to ascend the Temple Mount. All humans were considered too impure to enter into the Divine Presence without the tumah purification ritual; it required an extinct species of red heifer. Their cattle cloning efforts must have been successful.

“Going so soon?” Shimon asked.

He had put down his machine gun and was polishing a ram’s horn shofar. The side was embossed in silver, a depiction of Jerusalem. The focal point was the razed bare square of the Mount awaiting the building of the Third Temple.

“If I could borrow a motorbike,” David asked, limping down the stairs. “Something without a kick-starter please. Oh, and some animal blood, as much as you have.”

They pulled out a Sanyang bike, which someone had painted to look like a Harley-Davidson. The giggling pigtailed girls Milka and Lora brought out a few liters of chicken blood from a killing shack. They helped him smear the red coagulating goo all over the front of the motorcycle.

“Thank you very much,” David said in halting Yiddish. “Do you have a nice bomb shelter?”

They nodded.

“Stay near it.”

The smaller of the girls, Milka, flagrantly violating the halakhic rule against hugging, briefly embraced him and ran off. Milka idly sang: “... *yibenai, yibenai, yibenai Beit Hamikdash.*”

The Temple will be rebuilt.

Dusk was approaching. David nodded goodbye to Corporal Singh, then set off on the gore-spattered motorcycle, southeast toward the walled city.

79

NOBLE SANCTUARY OLD CITY JERUSALEM

TEMIR

Sporadic gunfire came from the direction of the newly opened Bab al-Dhahabi, the Golden Gate.

“Eylül,” Temir said, “see what that’s about. I will not have any interruptions.”

His dull but loyal man hesitated. “Shall I let the sheikh know you are here? He may call off the peace talks with the Jewish rabbi until he knows your will, Aga.”

“Peace is irrelevant.” Temir smiled. “Fulfillment is all. Go.”

His man left. It was a convenient excuse. Temir’s symbiont-enhanced hearing told him the shooting was nearly done; there was no large-scale attack on the gate.

He and Eylül had passed through the newly opened entryway directly onto the Noble Sanctuary; an Ottoman sultan had sealed the gate to prevent a prophecy from coming true. Some traditions said the Anointed One would enter there. Other legends held the exact opposite, that the darkest jinn of Shaitan would enter Jerusalem through the Golden Gate. The gate itself was split into two archways; one arch was called Mercy; the other arch was called Repentance. Why then, could not both prophecies be true?

It was nearly sunset. Up and down his spine, the symbiont lashed him with fiery needles of compulsion. Clinging around his entire torso, it had grown so large that he needed to keep his neck armor fastened. Up ahead, the shrine's golden half orb glinted. He had to enter the Dome of the Rock; inside was an object said to be as old as the creation of man. Jews called it the Foundation Stone, and under it was the Well of Souls.

A lower-ranked Grey Wolves member approached, interrupting him. His second brain urged him to kill.

“What?”

“Aga Temir, General bin Tamal seeks your counsel.”

General? Yesterday the fool was a Palestinian slave of the Israelites. Thanks to his war, West Bank police chiefs were calling themselves warlords and generals.

“Give him this data stylus,” Temir said, handing the man a metal tube. “We captured it from the enemy along with friend/foe cryptography. It may let you track movements of Israeli armor and troops. My journey has been long, I will rest and visit Qubbat al-Sakhrah.”

The man nodded and went. The symbiont's energy was strong. Over time, it had infused the proteins and minerals in his body with alloys, making his muscles stronger and his bones many times harder. He could have swatted the man like a fly. Temir strode alone up the steps to the Dome.

He stopped and listened.

Temir and his symbiont could hear the breathing of tens of thousands, the wind through the cypress and olive trees, the rumble of generators, and the hum of arc lights in Western Wall Plaza... and... No, it was nothing. He continued up the steps.

The Sanctuary had an area twice that of St. Peter's Square. However, the Mount's open spaces were broken up by stands of trees, small hills, masses of upturned rubble. These were ruins and rocks from past monuments, including smashed pillars of a Roman temple dedicated to Jupiter. The whole area had

the atmosphere of a historical park. Except for the gunfire, smoldering rocket craters, and desecrated corpses.

Someone had strung a dead Israeli border guard from a short stone column. Even without a head, the fellow was quite tall. His naked, long-toed feet were splayed on the paving stones.

Beyond the cadaver was a smaller structure known as the Dome of the Chain and the large gold-covered shrine. Temir went straight toward the men's entrance. A swift wind blew from the north. It was the breath of a devourer.

NEAR THE OLD CITY

DAVID

Under the fading light, David sped along. On either side of his motorcycle, the hollow mouths of shattered alleys along the wrecked streets retched up shadows. A fruit vendor's cart had overturned. He swerved to avoid it, and melons squashed underneath his tires. He put his foot out to regain his balance. The wind whipped smoke and cinders at him. He pulled his checkered cloth more tightly around his face.

From everything he had heard, there would be no way in through the gates on the northwestern side of the walled Old City. Shimon said New Gate had been blown up. Damascus, Herod's, and Lion's Gates were all in the hands of the Grey Wolves.

His gloves had multiple use features including retractable claws for wall scaling. He could not use his active camouflage suit yet. He needed to know more about the insurgents' countermeasures and, above all, where the leader of the insurgency was.

If he were only trying to get to the Western Wall, the Moroccan Gate, which was connected to main roads, would be the best way. Everyone said it was firmly in IDF hands. However, he had heard that Aga Temir, the leader of the Grey Wolves, would be on the Temple Mount. He could end this war with a single bullet. David had to try. He could always climb down into

Western Wall Plaza, assuming he was not discovered and torn apart by the mob which surely surrounded the Al-Aqsa mosque.

On No'omi Kiss Street, David halted the motorbike behind an orange-and-blue lottery kiosk. Its windows were broken and the cash box ripped out. There would be no winners today.

He was entering Arab-dominated neighborhoods. He made sure his yellow Israeli plate was covered with drying blood and put on the headband he had taken from Hadassah's morgue. It read: "Death to Israel."

The first ragtag rioters David encountered gave him a look, then slunk back. Maybe it was his well-organized kit or the gore decorating his transport that convinced them to let him be.

The hexagonal tower of the Rockefeller Museum loomed over the next street. He was just outside the Old City walls. The signs at the entrance had all been destroyed or repainted. "Rockefeller" had been scratched out and "Palestinian" stenciled over. The historical complex was built like a fort and currently being used as one. Rifle sights glinted from turret slits.

David slouched, getting all the military posture out of his body language and trying to look as Arab as he could.

A masked sentry called out the challenge code, "*Masaa' al-khayr.*" *Good evening.*

"*Masaa' an-nuur.*" *Evening of light.* David replied using his best Gazan accent; it and his darker skin had saved his ass more than once.

"It certainly will be soon, brother." The sentry was still cautious.

David had to gamble.

"I'm in a hurry. I have to visit the lair of the Grey Wolves." If the information he had heard at Shimon's place was not good, these guys would be suspicious right away. There was no time to figure out another way in, much less engage in a firefight. "I have a message for Aga Temir himself."

The guy's grip tightened on his rifle. Two more insurgents popped out from the other side of the parking lot entrance to the museum.

“How do you know that name?” he asked angrily. “We do not speak it.” One of the other men rasped through phlegm, “Maybe he’s a Jewish spy.” David kept cool. He had double-checked his handset was turned off. This would be a very bad time for Miss Aleph to call with a cheery *Shalom Ma Nishma*.

“Maybe *you* do not say his name,” David said arrogantly. “But we who have been with him since Hebron do.”

David was not going to claim to be an insurgent from Turkey. However, Hebron was ninety-nine-percent Palestinian and had been an early victory for the Grey Wolves. Temir would have recruited gofers and lieutenants from the locals.

“And,” David added, “the only Jewish blood here is on my handlebars. The former owner of my bike donated it.”

“Ha! You should have cut his forelocks and tied them on.”

“I’ll do that next time.” David laughed. “This Jew pig was thrashing around too much, trying to put out the fire I set to him. Now, let me pass.”

David took note as the sentry used an interesting device. It looked like a monocle rangefinder. He pointed it at the turret guard tower and clicked a button. They must be using invisible lasers to communicate. Those would not be affected by jamming. Groups of the Grey Wolves insurgents could coordinate their actions and swarm onto targets of opportunity, then reset rendezvous positions on the fly.

“*Ila-liqaa*,” David said as he drove past the checkpoint. *Until we meet again.*

When we do, he thought as he passed, *it will not be chicken blood on my handlebars.*

The streets beyond the Grey Wolves’ checkpoint continued to be mostly deserted. Yet David had a sense this battle’s ugliest face was still gestating in the bowels of the hate that had spawned it.

David looked up at the evening sky. He was behind enemy lines and a

legitimate target for the IDF. There had to be stealth Israeli air vehicles circling. They would not risk revealing themselves to blow up a lone motorbike. Probably.

He kept close to cover as he approached the Jerusalem walls. Constructed by an Ottoman sultan, they were still a formidable barrier to a ground army. Schlomo had been right about the Lion's Gate. Derech Sha'ar Avenue was a narrow road with high walls on either side. He found it crammed with every kind of debris you could imagine, mechanical, human and animal. It was impassable.

At the end of the road was a crater which looked like it had been made by a meteor. Ancient stones and new concrete had melted together under intense heat. Smoldering black tar-covered skeletons were strewn all over, even on low rooftops. Like the dead of Pompeii, some were caught singly, others were frozen fighting each other, strangling and stabbing. The Grey Wolves must have let off a thermal charge at the Lion's Gate, killing their own people as well as the massed Israeli defenders.

This had been a feint. The Grey Wolves had vigorously assaulted this gate into the city to attract the Israeli soldiers and guards from the Temple Mount. They had really been planning to enter the Mount directly through the only gate that led through the external walls and right up to the citadel.

He turned left and came to the tomb of the Virgin Mary. The Golden Gate, which was just ahead, had been sealed since the mid-1500s. They had even set a Muslim graveyard outside to prevent a prophecy from coming true.

"Screw prophecies," David muttered and headed straight for the Islamic cemetery.

As he got closer, he saw some new handicap access ramps had been built up from the causeway. At first, he thought he could ride right up to the gates of destiny.

"Turn your motor off and put your hands up!"

Lights strobed from a dozen tombstones. Random gunfire made him duck.

He should have tried to stealth his way in! He had his suit with him. He had been too eager.

Secondary reports like small arms lit up from behind David. *Pop, pop, pop.*

He covered his head with his arms. Four guys came down, zigzagging their way between the Muslim graves.

“Wait there, brother!” one of the Grey Wolves said. “The Israelis were just attacking. You could have been shot.”

They were not shooting at him. His disguise had worked, so far.

“I have to go in,” David snapped back. “I have news only for *his* ears.”

The four insurgents, including a younger one with an oozing bandage covering the left side of his face, raised weapons. He waited.

The last of the RIP rounds they had fired popped wildly behind him. Radically Invasive Projectiles were miniature cluster munitions. RIP rounds were big long bullets that flew only half as far as normal 7.62 rounds and broke apart on impact. The bullet fragments each had their own timed charge, which would go off a few seconds or minutes later.

Their use of random shrapnel and the strobe lights told David these guys had prepared against stealth incursions. Had he been wearing his active camouflage, he would have been lit up in the twilight like a Hanukkah wreath. RIP rounds only had to get close, perfect for taking out camouflaged commandos.

“Did anyone follow you?” the sentry leader said. “The sneaky Jews have been trying to get in all day.”

“Those sneaky Jews, damn them,” David agreed. “Hey, I thought I heard a helicopter. Let’s get under cover.”

He pointed to a small shrine about the size of a bus stop shelter. He and the insurgents moved there, out of sight of the gate.

“Wait,” the leader said. “Hold him there.”

David had a feeling this ID check would be more thorough. Russian databases probably held biometric information on all Israeli military officers.

If they had facial recognition tech... David limped forward, pretending his leg had been injured while he slid his bike to a stop. He did not have to pretend very much.

It turned out they had no digital face scanner. Instead, the fellow tipped his head back, dripped some eye drops into his left eye.

“Okay, let’s have a look,” the older leader said, turning around and blinking furiously.

Sometimes David had to let situations play out; other times he had to judge when his luck was going to run out. He noticed that the younger bandaged guy stared at him and his clothes with his good eye but said nothing. Maybe he could bluff his way up through the gate. On the other hand, the two other men were in an inviting position on either side of him helping him along, and no one up at the Golden Gate could see them.

What’s with those eye drops?

“Damn,” David said, feigning his left leg failing under him. He pulled back his pants leg to reveal bandages and blistered skin. “When I set fire to the former owner of the bike, some of the gas splashed back. Fucking hell, right?”

He braced his gloved hands on the shoulders of the two Grey Wolves next to him. The one in charge stopped blinking and stared at David’s face with bloodshot eyes.

David kicked him in the liver as hard as he could. At the same time, he extended grappling claws from the fingertips of his gloves. Those tore the throats out of the guys helping him stand. As they crumpled, he grabbed the already wounded kid, spat in his eye, and head-butted him.

“You... Jew!” the leader wheezed as he rolled breathlessly on the ground.

He was nearly knocked out from the solid boot under his rib cage. Before he could crawl around the edge of the shrine to warn the guards up the hill, David grabbed him. He retracted the claws on his right hand and pumped his palm twice. The glove stiffened into a cast-iron mitt and turned into a high-

tech version of the ancient Greek cestus battle gloves. Special hydraulics pushed heavy liquefied tungsten where he needed it. He could put his full body weight into a hammer strike.

His fist came down like a small sledgehammer and crunched the small parts of the guy's spine and the surrounding blood vessels. With no fear of breaking his hand, he hit the guy in the back of the head again and was rewarded with a satisfying crunch.

David spun around in the direction of the wounded kid. He was wiping off David's spit and had backed up against the concrete wall of the shrine.

"I... I knew who you were," he stammered, pointing at his pocket. "I didn't tell them."

David glanced down. Inside was a small strip of white cloth embroidered with blue Hebrew letters reading: *Chazak ve'ematz*.

The Orthodox girl Milka must have slipped it into his pocket when she hugged him. There was a bit of ash on it. It was supposed to purify and protect him. It had almost gotten him killed.

"Thanks," David said, roughly pushing the teenager back.

His right hand opened, and he felt the mechanism of the glove stiffen. Using the modified Krav Maga spear hand strike and these bitchin' gloves, he was sure he could crush through this young man's eye socket and feel the insides of his brain. As appealing as that idea was... he paused.

He glanced up the hill to the gate. No one had seen anything.

"Let's talk about your future," David whispered. His steel-hard molded glove remained cocked two feet from its juicy brain target. He nodded to the tombs all around.

"You can join these people guarding the eastern wall—and may I say, they are lying down on the job. Or, you can take yourself out of the fight and head to Mount Scopus medical center."

The boy sleeved off the last of David's saliva.

"Decide. My arm is getting sore."

The kid wilted. The zeal to slaughter Zionist pigs, which had been drummed into his head since before he could write his own name, drained out of him like the blood draining from the corpses of his martyred buddies.

“They’ll shoot me if I run,” he said. He took his eye off David’s gore-dripping gauntlet for a second to stare up the hill.

“They’ll be busy,” David said. “And the hospital guards won’t shoot you either. Just call out *shloshah-Tish’ah-Shloshah* as you approach.”

That was Hebrew for 3-9-3, the code for low-level Shin Bet informants if they were in trouble.

“*Shloshar-Tish’lah-Shloshar*,” the young man mumbled.

“Good enough. Go.”

Killing the boy was the smarter choice. Once the junior Grey Wolves member was down on the road, he could raise the alarm.

“Uh...” The Palestinian tempted fate by hesitating. “Don’t you want to know about the eye drops?”

In all the excitement, David had completely forgotten. He lowered his hand and rested it against the wall of the shrine. He hoped the kid would see it as a sign of reprieve and not a sign of concussive dizziness, which it also was.

“It better make sense.”

The boy told him.

It made sense.

David grabbed the bottle of eye drops and squirted some in. It smelled like animal urine and stung. He squirted more.

When his eyes cleared, he looked at the guard captain’s face. Bits of broken teeth decorated the dead man’s wide-open mouth. Much more interestingly, the right side of his face was covered with invisible writing. This was the Grey Wolves’ low-tech friend-foe tag system!

“*Ben-zona*.”

A stylus the shape of a glue stick was in the same pocket as the revealing eye drops.

“Here, draw.”

It was a simple phrase, the title of a famous Islamic story: “The Wolf and the Word.”

الذئب وكلمة

David pulled a knife. The kid jumped back.

“Relax. I need to see.” He used the polished blade as a mirror. Although reading Arabic in a mirror was not something he had ever practiced, the script looked okay.

David nodded sharply toward the road. “Bye.”

The kid ran.

David grabbed one of the sentry’s rifles and shot in the air, emptying the magazine at the Mercy Gate.

“Jews!” he yelled. “Sneaky Jews attacking!”

David ducked over to the other side of the shrine and scrambled fearfully up the dusty hill.

“Who are you?” From out of a haze of smoke, a gun barrel greeted him. “Where is Jamal?”

David turned his head to the left, revealing the invisible writing. The guy blinked and relaxed. The terrorist face painting worked.

“All dead,” David panted. “A group of commandos came at us using camouflage.”

“Sneaky devils.”

Sneakier than you think.

The guard shouted back to the gate entrance. Strobe lights flashed and flares went up. Two of the homemade SAM rockets went up as well.

“I have to go in.”

“No one goes in.”

“*He* will want to hear what I have to report.”

“Who are you? I’ve never seen you before. Who is your cell leader?”

Fighting was no use. If he killed this guy, fifty guns would be on him.

“The Aga personally sent me north. I bring word from our allies there.”

There were pro-Palestinian radicals like Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria. They were currently aligned with Iran, but if the Turkish-backed forces had taken Jordan and central Iraq, they would know which way the wind was blowing. David gambled they would not have direct lines of communication.

“So, we will attack them from all sides.”

“Inshallah.”

Then, just like that, he was waved through the Golden Gate right onto the Temple Mount. They escorted David through freshly dug tunnels.

“Aren’t you worried about air strikes?”

David wanted as much information as he could get to help the IDF retake the City.

“Let them drop bombs, see where they land,” the guard said arrogantly. “We’ve jammed their targeting.”

“Some missiles have visual and landscape recognition.”

“That’s the other things these pulse lasers do besides see through camouflage, they confuse targeting scanners,” the gate captain said, pointing to mobile equipment. “They’ll be as likely to land bombs on their own people by the Western Wall. Thanks to our martyr brigades, we are the ones who have the most accurate and most devastating weapons.”

“You don’t have to tell me, brother,” David said. “I was in the glorious Battle of Hebron.”

“A valiant victory.” The guy looked at his pack. “What’s that? No Zulfiqar weapons in the Noble Sanctuary.”

David opened the flap. Zulfiqar weapons must be the Grey Wolves’ name for the thermal bombs.

“Of course not. Look, this is just stuff I stole.”

“*Ma’a Salama*,” the guard said. *Go with peace.*

Despite it being the dumbest thing he had heard all day, David repeated it back.

The stones sealing up the gate had not been blasted open. They had been melted through, and very carefully, with thermal lances. The new chasm zigged left, then right, the same as some of the other older gates. Any infantry trying to storm through would get bunched up and massacred; other fighters barely looked at him as he passed. Many were running out to the fake battle he had started.

It took David a second to get his bearings. No one had come through this way for hundreds of years. The passages ahead had to be a large expansion of Solomon's Stables built in secret by the Waqf. He was near the southern part of the Mount; Temir would most likely show up here.

In the corners of a bare, cavernous room, he saw huddled figures. From behind a curtain, women whispered. *East Jerusalem and the refugee camps must be empty*, thought David.

He pressed through the crowd in the catacombs under the Al-Aqsa mosque. A throng of hijab-wearing women herded a group of children upstairs. He despaired of finding a quiet spot.

It seemed most of the quarter million noncitizen Arabs of East Jerusalem were on the Mount. Worshippers caught in the tumult? Refugees from destroyed parts of the Muslim quarter? They were all hostages and human shields in this war the Grey Wolves had started.

That made his mission all the more urgent. If he could kill this Aga Temir and decapitate the Grey Wolves, Palestinian leaders could be talked into a cease-fire.

David had been to the Western Wall many times, but respecting his father's wishes, he had never ascended the Mount. David forced himself to stride confidently through twisting narrow passageways no non-Muslim had ever trodden.

He looked, listened, and smelled the air. Cooking area, left. Sleeping area, right. Toilets, down the stairs.

At the back of what looked like a dead-end passageway, a small thing

twisted in his peripheral vision. He looked. Nothing there. David blinked. Was it his ultraviolet-filter eye drops? They were wearing off; he could barely make out the identifying writing on the faces of the men he passed.

Without quite knowing why, he slunk into the side alcove. It was so small he had to twist sideways. He felt airflow. Some bricks had been loosely stacked in front of a gap. He got through, pulling his pack behind him. In dim light, he saw a staircase up.

Something was scratching at stone. He decided to trust his ears and shut his eyes. He reached out and caught it. It felt small, slippery, and it wriggled. He looked. A camouflaged lizard lay writhing in his hands. It took him a second to recognize its movements as mechanical not organic. A robot chameleon.

Its skin was covered with color-variable coating. If this was a sneaky Jewish lizard, it was one like he had never encountered before. The only explanation was Shin Bet or the IDF had sent these bots to scout the lower levels of the Mount.

This little fellow's tail had been caught in a crevice; he pulled it free. Once back down on the flagstones, it assumed the color of the floor and the wall. Two tiny red eyes looked up at him, and then they too changed color and merged into shadow.

Good idea.

Even with his language skills, people who actually had been with the Grey Wolves since Jordan and Hebron would know he was a fake insurgent. Stealth was his best option. He put on his active camouflage suit.

Making sure he was completely covered and had a full battery charge, David followed the route the lizard had taken. The crumbling stairs led to a cistern lid on the surface of the Temple Mount. He came out near the stubs of Roman-style columns and other fat round metallic tubes. With meter-wide mouths pointing skyward, they looked like homemade siege mortar tubes. If these started firing one-ton shells down into the city, casualties would be

random and catastrophic. That made his mission all the more urgent.

If he stayed crouched, his cover was quite good. Men passed him, talking excitedly. Older women sat in a circle of plastic chairs. Sporadic gunfire had stopped. Bare and softly shod feet ran over ancient stones. In the fading sunlight, the whole low hilltop impressed David as a large altar held up to the darkening blue sky.

Night was best for his camo suit. Twilight was full of shadows, which could pose a problem. Luckily he was close to a grove of evergreen trees. He backed up against the nearest one and got his bearings. He was between the al-Aqsa and the Dome of the Rock. His foot snapped a small twig. He froze. None of the figures rushing past noticed. There was a hush over the whole place. Like hundreds of thousands of people holding their breath. Ready to sigh their relief or scream their panic.

David edged through the line of trees. Something was going on between the plaza and the top of the wall. More confident in his camouflage as the light of the dying day faded, he peered over into the plaza.

A scissor gantry had been raised up to the top of the Western Wall. It was the same sort that might be used for painting or exterior cladding work. Behind it, the Mughrabi Bridge entrance ramp was in tatters and on fire. That was the only entrance onto the Mount for non-Muslims and where Jerusalem's rabbi had been thrown down to his death.

Near the lip of the wall was a backhoe loader. Someone had been prying out the big limestone blocks and sending them tumbling onto the Jewish prayer areas. It was a vile attempt to dismantle Judaism's holiest site, one which was visited nearly twenty million times each year. But the damage was not what caught David's attention.

On the scissor gantry's platform stood a single figure in a black hat and suit. David knew him instantly. It was his father, Rabbi Baumann. He was only seventy meters away.

David forced himself back. If his father was there, he was trying to make

peace with the insurgents. Lia had to be with him. He searched the crowd. He could see only Israeli soldiers and an enormous triple-sized tank, a type he had never encountered.

He was torn between climbing down to the plaza or continuing with his plan to assassinate the leader of the Grey Wolves. He had no idea where the man might be. If he were caught, he could endanger the cease-fire talks his father was holding.

David looked for a way to climb down the Western Wall without being seen. He would have to wait until after sunset. As he skulked by a copse of olive trees near the Dome of the Rock, a figure moved. David noticed him because he was moving in the opposite direction to where everyone was looking. He moved toward the golden dome. By his commanding gait and physical presence, David had no doubt this was the Aga Temir.

David tore himself away from the scene in the plaza and followed his prey.

WESTERN WALL PLAZA

LIA

“Where is the rabbi going by himself?” Mr. Suleiman asked.

“Why doesn’t he have any guards?” her mother pestered. “It doesn’t seem safe out there.”

Lia’s parents had been through so much today. They had seemed so reassured and relieved when they encountered her father-in-law, a chief rabbi of Israel and a cabinet minister. Surely they must have thought the worst of the day was over.

“It’s perfectly safe,” Lia lied. “He’s just going to talk to the Arab leaders. Everything will be fine then.”

She ushered her parents over by the gigantic tank with Steph and Spencer. It seemed like the safest place in Western Wall Plaza.

Tens of thousands of armed Grey Wolves on the Mount faced off against a smaller number of Orthodox militia. The better-armed Jewish fighters had dug in on the opposite side of the big plaza. IDF armor and soldiers were right in the middle, having barged through from the Batei Mahasse roundabout. Every eye was on the lone figure in black who was getting up on the gantry scaffolding.

Lia coughed and squinted her eyes. Foul smoke blew down at them from the smoldering fire that was slowly consuming the Mughrabi Bridge. No one

seemed in a hurry to put it out. Just below, she could still make out the blood and gore splotches left by the body of Rabbi Steinholtz, the first peace envoy to attempt negotiating.

“He knows what he’s doing,” Lia said, trying to sound reassuring. “It’s been arranged. The Waqf’s sheikh, the highest-ranking Sunni cleric in Jerusalem, is in charge on the Temple Mount. Everyone wants peace. They just have to talk terms.”

After making sure her family and friends were as safe as they could be, she walked to the perimeter. On the way, she borrowed binoculars from an Army Storm jeep.

Rabbi Baumann had reached the bottom of a scissor-style gantry. It would take him six stories up to be level with the top of the Western Wall. She zoomed in. Her focus and resolution adjusted automatically for twilight.

“Man, I hope this works,” said an IDF corporal. He and another soldier slouched against an armored personnel carrier. “Have you seen what the Haredi militia brought to the party? They have better weapons than we do. And up there”—he pointed to the Mount—“that’s more bloody Arabush than I’ve ever seen in one place.”

“Yeah, looks like Jordan versus Iran in the World Cup finals,” the other man said. “Twenty shekels Baumann gets it just like the last rabbi.”

“*Tistom-tah-peh!*” Lia swore at the man to his sudden shock. “You, reserve private, report to your CO. Now!”

Being talked to like that by a female in civilian clothes who outranked him left the man stunned for a moment. He glared at the ID on her neck lanyard, then sulked away.

“You, Corporal,” Lia said to the wide-eyed fellow now standing at attention. “Mind your post. Stay aware. Sound carries. Do you want one hundred thousand people who have been outraged for generations to hear you call them Arabush?”

She turned back to the scene on top of the wall. Something was going on.

Rabbi Baumann stood holding the railing of the construction platform. It was raised all the way up. A foot-wide gap separated him from the topmost stones of the ancient structure, which had been built by Herod the Great.

In front of Rabbi Baumann, a crowd of armed young Arab men parted. An older, shorter man in a white hat and an olive-green robe stepped forward. The rabbi's body language visibly relaxed. Of course. The two powerful clerics would have known each other for ages.

“People of Jerusalem!”

The sheikh's voice lanced out like a sonic knife through the gathering dusk. He spoke in Arabic through the muezzin call-to-prayer loudspeakers.

“This day, both my son and my daughter have died,” he continued. His voice was strained, exhausted, but calm. “The rabbi's son is missing. Let no more children or parents perish. We are servants of the same Almighty.”

Above the two religious leaders stood a huge holographic screen. It was on poles about twenty feet above the gantry platform. It had been taken from the mall entrance. Automatic translations in Hebrew, Arabic, Russian, and English scrolled underneath.

Everyone on both sides could see the image of the men on the platform no matter where they stood. The crowds waited breathlessly.

“This is His holy city,” the sheikh said. “We come together and urge calm. We implore everyone to cease the destructive fighting as of this moment. My friend Rabbi Baumann calls this the Western Wall; I call it the al-Buraq Wall.

“But for all our sakes, our children's sakes, and all those who have survived this new blight of war we have had yet again to endure, tonight before the sun sets, we must extend open hands across the space that divides us.”

Lia watched Rabbi Baumann extend his hand.

Suddenly, out of the corner of her field of vision, a figure moved from the left corner of the wall. It came from the direction of the Dome. Lia zoomed in. The figure phased in and out of view.

Active camo?

Was someone planning an assassination to sabotage the cease-fire? She looked around to find the designated sniper. An IDF woman with stringy reddish hair lay prone on top of a vehicle. She was looking through a scope. Had she seen the figure?

Lia zoomed back in to see if the person was armed. He stopped, seemed to react to something she could not see. Then he tore his camouflage hood off. The man's bloody face twisted in a rictus of sheer agony.

It's David!

Lia was too shocked to say or do anything for a second. That was all it took. Above and behind David, the last rays of the day's sun bounced off the golden Dome of the Rock, then the dome shuddered, cracked, and fell in on itself.

The sound of its explosion as it disintegrated into a billowing cloud of ruin was lost in the outcry of thousands of voices that rose on every side of her, shouting, gasping, screaming.

NOBLE SANCTUARY

TEMIR

Temir stepped steadily toward the Dome of the Rock. It stood, blazing gloriously golden above the drabness of gray Jerusalem. His feet felt alternatively light and then suddenly heavy, as though unwilling to lift from the ground. This was the end of their journey, his and Nazeema's; what more there was to do, he could not even fathom. His symbiont sensed something to his left, in the knot of trees. He pretended to move on. Then in one motion, he ducked, picked up a stone, and threw.

It hurled through the cedars, making soft thuds as it tumbled.

"Are you well?" A bored-looking guard from the Dome came toward him. "What are you doing here, brother?"

Temir straightened up. The two African Muslims recognized him.

"Apologies, Aga. We were told to watch for Jewish spies and infiltrators."

"May your eyes be keen and knives sharp," Temir said.

By the symbols carved on their faces, he saw these were religious fanatics from Boko Haram. They would not understand what he was about to do. Killing them would take too much time. Everyone on the Noble Sanctuary was watching the Waqf's sheikh on the Western Wall. It had to be now.

Temir passed the Nigerian guards and entered a hallway. It smelled faintly of fresh paint. There was always construction going on. The hallway he was

in had recently been built and led directly to shrine of the Sakhras, the Pierced Stone. Where he was compelled to go. He gripped the pouch of sand around his neck.

Boxes for men's shoes gaped empty along one wall; women came in by a different entrance. His heightened senses of hearing and smell told him the shrine under the golden dome was empty.

Not long now. Not far now.

There was a soft flapping sound. Somewhere in his mind, he knew it was wrong. Out of place. But so close to his goal, he could only think of the great wings of the flying horse Buraq. He had ascended from the sacred stone El-Sakhras. Their journey's end was just beyond the heavy metal doors at the end of the walkway. On the thick muscles of his back, which were covered by the symbiont, he felt wings eager to emerge. Amber colored and translucent, he imagined they were just about to rip through his shirt...

The swishing of a knife through air shocked him out of his vision. The blade came at him from thin air.

Temir caught the strike through the meat of his arm. It was powerful and fast. The blow sent him reeling. The blade passed between his forearm bones and continued forward, not stopping until the needle-sharp point had scored his cheek.

Temir grunted but kept silent, as silent as his assailant. If he called the guards, they would delay him. If they saw his symbiont, they would call him monster and devil.

Recovered from the initial shock, Temir twisted his arm, he captured the blade between his enhanced bones. Temir wrenched the haft of the knife free from his enemy's viselike grip. He front-kicked the half-visible form backward.

An active camouflage suit! Israeli technology. That must have been the figure trailing him through the trees. The figure was an effigy of dust and shadow against the dark wall. It stumbled back but did not fall.

Temir's augmented combat consciousness took over. He assessed his wound, the enemy threat level, and his tactical situation. The attacker was male, nearly the same build as Temir, and highly trained. Why use a knife and not a pistol or explosives? Even a suppressed bullet would be heard by the guards. Conclusion: the attacker wanted to complete his mission but also wanted to survive. A clear weakness.

The knife had to be removed before it caused more tissue damage. He pulled it out of his forearm. If he stabbed his attacker, he might give an involuntary cry. He needed both hands free. Temir snapped the eight-inch blade under his foot. He would crush the life out of this insect.

The camouflaged assassin rose and circled.

Temir's right hand clasped over his own left forearm. He circled in the opposite direction, buying himself a few seconds. His symbiont dispatched enhanced clotting factors and special enzymes to seal the gash from the inside out. From now on, any bleeding would be superficial.

The figure was fading into the background again. No matter. Temir could find him by the sounds of his feet and breath. There was an easier way. He kicked a pot of paint off a bench, splattering it across a wide area. His attacker was turned into a semi-invisible leopard.

"I see your spots," Temir whispered. "Time to fight like a man."

The enemy leaped, not as quickly as Temir anticipated. Perhaps he was wounded from the body kick. He blocked a looping punch with his right arm. A dull crack inside made Temir realize his mistake.

The blow was superhuman. It felt like a mule had kicked him. Even as Temir spun his left elbow forward and caught his opponent with a glancing blow, he knew he was in trouble.

The symbiont urged him on. Only his radius was broken. His right arm was still straight, but it was more than sixty-percent impaired. Time for new tactics.

Temir threw both his wounded arms over his head to block further blows.

This left his midsection exposed. Though this man was strong, he was no cyborg. Temir's hearing would have detected the telltale mechanical buzz. The way the stealth-suited figure moved... his exaggerated blows could only be delivered by someone wearing metal melee gloves. Only human strength and endurance was behind them. Temir faltered backward.

The attacker, eager to finish his mission and survive, took the bait. Instead of breaking Temir's other arm and his legs, as he could have, he went for the body knockout.

Before the symbiont had grown to encase his torso, a single strike from those sledgehammer fists would have downed Temir. The thudding blows to his rib cage and liver and groin lifted him clear off the dusty flat stones.

They also tired his enemy. After the initial flurry, every subsequent strike came more slowly. Blow after blow landed. They were absorbed by his symbiont breastplate. When his enemy was nearly exhausted, Temir struck.

He grabbed the back of the man's hooded head and launched upward with a knee strike. The assassin fell back, likely unconscious. Completely vulnerable.

The outer door started to open; something must have alerted the guards. Temir grabbed a painter's tarp and threw it over his vanquished enemy.

"Aga, we heard noise."

"Who left such a mess in this holy place?"

"We-we are sorry." The guards looked around, confused. They only saw him kneeling in front of a tarp and a spilled can of paint, as though he had stumbled over it in the dim light.

"We shall have all the time needed make the Noble Sanctuary the glory of the Faith it should be. Back to your posts."

The door closed, shutting out the final rays of the fading day. Temir put his face down to the shape under the tarp.

"Shhh," Temir said to the enemy he could hear breathing in the dark. "May your own wings take you away, and pray we never meet again."

The symbiont cursed Temir and drove needles of pain into his spine for disregarding the command to kill, to splinter the enemy's bones into soft pink paste. Temir rose. He was still a man. He was still in charge of what he did. This sacred moment must not be sullied.

He walked quickly down the corridor to the inner door of the Dome. Once through, he barred it from the inside. He paused, braced his broken arm in his shirt, and coughed a little. The day's fading light came through stained-glass windows above.

Jews called it the Foundation Stone. It was said that Abraham put Isaac upon it when the patriarch was commanded to sacrifice his son. Muslims called it Sakhrat al-Buraq. It was part of the Prophet's Night Journey on the back of the massive winged horse Buraq.

He opened the last wrought-iron gate and stepped onto the Stone. Its surface was uneven, lunar. So close now. He pulled the pouch of bloodied sand off his neck. There, in front of him, was the passage. The way to the Well of Souls lay through a circular hole drilled right through the Stone.

Buraq's wings thrummed and sent down waves of heat. He had not expected that. The heat made the bases of the columns all around seem to shimmer like the horizon or a mirage.

"You see, Nazeema, we truly are in the midst of—"

Green demons the size of small lizards appeared. Oblivious to gravity, they clung on all the columns holding up the Dome. They had glowing red eyes that suddenly strobed a signal—a warning! In a controlled symphony of precise destruction, one after another, they exploded.

NO!

Temir's superior senses registered the detonations of shaped charges. He could taste the tetra-nitrate in the air. There was no stopping them. The supports throughout the structure vaporized. For a moment, the Dome hung there above him, supported only by the gusts of wind from the wings of Buraq.

Then it fell.

Temir launched himself forward. Chunks of the Dome hit his legs, arms, and back. They pinned him in the dark, inside clouds of dust and faint glitters of turquoise, vermillion, and gold. He used the last of his strength to break free. Still more showered down. Somehow the gateway was still there. Crawling, guiding himself by the one eye not caked with blood and dirt, he dragged himself forward.

What was left of Temir dug his hand in the rough surface of the Stone. Above, the open evening sky had become the shrine's new ceiling.

He was bleeding so badly his symbiont gave up. Temir's blood flowed in rivulets over the ancient rock, as Isaac's would have if Abraham's knife hand had not been halted at the last moment.

With his teeth, he pulled open the pouch of sand. Its contents emptied into the small stream of his own blood. With broken fingers, he prodded and pushed and urged the grains forward, downward through the passageway, through the middle of the Foundation Stone, and into the space beneath, the Well of Souls.

83

TEMPLE MOUNT

DAVID

Images of an enormous winged horse swept through David's concussed brain.

"Wha...?"

He couldn't breathe. Something was stifling him. With heavy arms, he pushed it away. A dusty oilcloth slid off.

The flash knockout wore off, and David remembered where he was. He recalled the man who should have been dead a dozen times over, a man who had beaten him, a man who then let him live.

At the end of the hall, the door to the inner sanctum of the Dome eased closed. Heavy bolts thudded, sealing it from the inside.

Even if he had the strength to go after Temir, he would never get to him without making noise. The damage he'd delivered, the stabbing, the broken arm, the body shots that should have crushed every vital organ in the man's torso and splintered his spine into small pieces... How had Temir survived?

Hushed grumbling came from the crowd outside the corridor. The Waqf's sheikh spoke over loudspeakers. Temir was out of his reach; the IDF would get him. He had to get back to Lia and the rabbi in the Western Wall square below. He checked his active camouflage suit. It was his only chance of slipping off the crowded Temple Mount. The hood was sticky with his blood

and drool but it still worked.

Near the floor of the corridor was a small opening for workers and painters; he ducked out. At the doorway into the shrine, the Nigerian fanatics stared angrily at the picture of the Waqf sheikh on the big holographic screen hanging above Western Wall Plaza.

David managed to hobble as far as the stand of trees near the edge of the wall. He leaned against the trunk of an olive tree. He could still climb down the wall, if he took it slowly. David inhaled as deep a breath as his damaged ribs would allow. He did not get the chance to exhale.

The last rays of the sun were hitting the rooftops of the Old City. Ahead of him stood Rabbi Baumann and the Muslim cleric; less than a foot separated the two men. The rabbi reached over to take the other's outstretched hands.

David felt wide stone blocks heave under his feet. The tree he was pressed against creaked and swayed. With certainty that spiked ice water through his veins, he knew what was happening. He just could not believe it. It made no sense!

Above him he saw the golden Dome of the Rock which was glowing orange in the last rays of the setting sun. It cracked in half.

He had to run, get to his father. He sprinted along the top of the wall. His camouflage facemask stifled him; David tore it off and kept running. Just behind the rumble that turned into a roar, a blast of dust came through the trees from the collapsing shrine. Thick and hot, it overtook him and blanketed the whole side of the Mount with a hot, dry fog.

He had witnessed enough house demolitions; that was no amateur car bomb. It was a controlled implosion which would take demolition experts hours to set.

He coughed and hacked out fine dust and bigger particles of dust. He glanced up. The iconic landmark of Jerusalem was gone. After standing there for over thirteen hundred years, the Dome had been demolished in an instant.

For that instant, it seemed he was the only one moving. The tens of

thousands in the square, more on the ramparts of the wall, and the hundred thousand behind them, all held their breath. It was not shock or incitement, not at first. The first reaction was the same as Americans had when they watched two Manhattan skyscrapers implode. The same as Parisians had when the Lord's Resistance Army blew out one of the legs of the Eiffel Tower.

They stood and gaped at the doorway to chaos that had just opened. There was no turning the clock back even by a microsecond.

David ran, blood pounding hotly through his head. Whispers gathered, then these coalesced into guttural shouts and were cut through by screams of anguish.

“Filthy infidels!”

“Betrayal!”

The crowd on the Mount pressed forward.

“They’ve bombed the holy *shrine*!”

“Death to them all!”

David bumped into an elderly man. Gore dripped from his eye sockets. Had he mutilated himself in grief? There was no chance to help him. The old man lurched forward and plunged over the edge of the wall. Stiff and rigid as it fell, his body disappeared into the cloud of dust from vaporized detritus of his disintegrated monument.

David nearly fell too. He had come to the part of the wall they had tried to demolish. A big man with a pickaxe blocked his way. David shot him.

Above, the sky exploded. Rockets fell and drones rose over the Mount. Unquenchable fires ignited by white phosphorous burst out everywhere. The first Israeli helos uncloaked and opened fire. Debris and body parts blew like leaves in an autumn wind.

Insurgent rockets hit a helo. It tilted and spun, crashing out of sight, sending up a fireball that silhouetted the stone tower capped skyline.

David had to slow down and feel his way along. He encountered a mass of

hard plastic. These were the strange rolls the Grey Wolves had lined up along the top of the Western Wall. Once pitched over the side, they unfurled and inflated. Designed like emergency slides used on aircraft, they allowed for mass descent of fighters from the top of the Mount into the plaza and the streets. Other Grey Wolves threw ropes over the edge and slid down.

On the other side of the plaza, every window and doorway occupied by Jewish militia erupted with muzzle flashes. David kept low and moved forward.

There! He finally saw the edge of the gantry where Rabbi Baumann was. The big video screen was shattered and bent down on its supports, flashing sparks from cut wires and threatening to crush the rabbi.

“Father!”

The sheikh had fallen off the wall. His father had caught him. The rabbi had him by both hands. The older, smaller man looked catatonic. His hands lay limp in the rabbi’s ham-fisted grip. Against all odds, his father started to pull the stricken man up.

From out of the dust cloud, a black-clad figure leaped out, knives flashing in either hand. The short curved blades sank into the green robes covering the sheikh’s back. Rabbi Baumann’s grip failed. The conjoined figures thrashed in the air, struck a metal crossbar, and disappeared.

David picked up a weapon from the ground. It was a rotary Streetsweeper shotgun. All around him were armed Grey Wolves and advancing local militant fanatics, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, all of the vicious killers he’d fought against his entire career. The women he had seen on the Mount were back down in the Solomon’s Stables Muslim prayer hall. The combatants on the top of the Mount were swarming over the edge of the holiest site in Judaism with only one aim: to turn the streets of Old Jerusalem into rivers of blood.

Not while he could still fight!

Peering through the dust and debris from the shattered shrine, David shot everything and anything that moved. The gun’s two-inch barrel sent tempered

glass shards ripping into exposed skin of the first jihadi, slugs went through that body and into the next behind, then a tungsten penetrator shot the third and possibly fourth attacker. It was the perfect weapon to permanently disperse a thick mass of enemies standing shoulder to shoulder, blocking his way. David's ammo ran out much faster than his rage.

He reached the teetering gantry platform. The crowd here was sparse because of the Streetsweeper barrage, and the enemy's attention was elsewhere. Most of the Grey Wolves were too busy using ropes and ladders to get down to the plaza to kill the people they blamed for the sacrilegious destruction of the golden Dome.

"Son?" a muted voice penetrated the pounding in his ears.

The rabbi's head dripped blood, and his eyes were looking as they had never looked before. His father was confused, at a complete loss. The platform he was kneeling on wobbled, ready to collapse.

"You can't stay on that thing," David yelled back.

A rioter came too close, so David picked up a rock and dashed his brains out. Underneath a dead body, he found a coiled rappelling rope. David threw it across the gantry platform. It dropped to the ground on the other side.

Minding his stupid burned leg, David jumped for the railing. It was only four feet away but wobbling. He missed. Somehow, he caught the rope with one hand. The rabbi grabbed David's clothes and pulled him up the rest of the way.

Up in the sky, the helos had backed off. Three or four were down. David knew the Israelis' next tactic. So did Temir's people. Metallic chaff from the immense mortar tubes he had seen exploded skyward from the Mount. Bursts of laser light lanced up to blind and disorient mechBrain targeting.

"Missiles incoming, guidance systems will be fouled. They will hit anywhere!" he yelled, his dulled ears only barely registering his words. The rabbi nodded and grabbed for the thick black rope.

"No." This was no time to learn how to fast rope. "Hang on."

David grabbed the rope, wrapped the end around his ankle and instep, and felt his whole body seize up as all two hundred and forty pounds of Israel's leading cleric locked his arms around his shoulders. They pushed off.

They slid too fast. David felt his gloves shred, the rope grating into his palms. He pushed his wrist to his forearm with the rope in between to slow their slide. His injured leg was numb but had locked straight like a piece of wood. It just had to hold out for another few meters.

"Ungh!"

They landed at the base of the Western Wall in a heap. Thousands of written prayer notes fluttered on the ground. Jews had been placing their fondest wishes, hopes, and dreams into cracks between the mighty stones for hundreds of years. The newest ones fell out, some unfurled, and rose on air currents. Others burned.

"More salads, Dad," David huffed, rolling to his knees, trying to stand. "Less latkes."

The rabbi pressed himself and David against the wall. Above them, the gantry creaked and tottered. It was coming apart. Steel bars fell. They clanged down inches away from them. His father pointed in the direction of the Mughrabi Bridge ramp.

"Lia!"

David nodded and fell sideways. He spat in frustration. Without help, he could not have walked another step. Both his hands were a sodden, shredded mess. If they found Lia, he would be the one who needing saving. David could see no way out of the plaza.

Flashes lit the dark sky. Missiles from aircraft darted in toward the top of the Mount. Some found their marks, others spiraled into the city or missed completely.

Many of the Grey Wolves had already descended. They were dispersing, ducking into the side streets where no tanks could follow.

A small object whizzed over the edge of the wall, outward, down into the

plaza.

“Zulfiqar! Zulfiqar! Zulfiqar!”

A few more followed.

“Bombs,” David gasped. “Big BIG bombs.”

David started counting.

He pulled at his father.

One, two...

“Out!” It was all David could say.

Three, four...

He wanted to explain about thermal mini-fusion bombs.

Five...

No time. No place to go. Wilson’s Arch at the north end was completely blocked by tangled metal, fallen rocks, and bodies.

Six, seven...

In another few seconds, the whole plaza would be an incinerator.

He had no options left.

Nine...

But the rabbi did. David felt himself pushed; he fell backward down a hole.

Ten, eleven...

When he realized he had not fainted, David found himself underneath the Western Wall. His hands scraped against plywood struts; he landed on sandy earth. It was dark. Darker still when his father slammed a metal shutter closed behind them.

Twelve...

The explosions shook the foundations of the City of cities. A bright light burst through every seam in the huge base stones. It was a hideous light, a mockery of the daylight that had forsaken them.

“Go!” The rabbi pushed him along the unknown passage.

Flames licked through every crack. The very air itself was on fire and sped greedily after them. David crawled to where it was dark and cool.

**BRITISH CONSULATE ANNEX
JERUSALEM**

ELLIE

Biogenic Armageddon. If that just doesn't take the biscuit.

"I should have known it would get worse," Ellie said under her breath.

"I'll let the undersecretary explain it." Ms. China, their glittering host in the British embassy annex, motioned them up a spiral staircase. "It involves politics and nuclear missile threats."

The structure they went up to was a combination gazebo and solarium. There they met refugees who had fled the bombed-out American embassy in downtown Jerusalem: three bored US Marines and one terrified undersecretary: Emmanuel Benitez. Ellie noticed the thirtyish man's shirt had French cuffs, probably in an effort to dress like an ambassador, but his cufflinks were not real silver, and his suit was off the rack and made of Terry Rayon. Even if it had not been splashed with brown muck, his wardrobe would not have inspired much confidence.

"Would you excuse us?" Benitez said to the Marines. They exited without a word.

Through the windows, which Ellie assumed had some concealment features, they had a good view of the front garden and the fountain. A small bird hopped off the top of the main gate, eager to peck something on the

walkway. Just before it landed, a silent dart shot out from the fountain; the bird disappeared in a puff of small feathers.

“Ah... are these people cleared to know anything?” the American diplomat stuttered. Benitez was clearly shaken up by his ride out of war-torn downtown Jerusalem inside a poop-sucking truck.

“Ms. China should have briefed you on our mission,” Mr. Perdix said.

In the hushed room, Ms. China’s laugh made a tinkling sound like crystal stemware breaking.

“You mean the daft farce in Turkey where you got your shill kidnapped and surveillance subject killed?” She had that rather blunt Scottish way of speaking. “Last we heard, you were headed into the Iraq meat grinder. Everyone had written you off until you showed up at Hadassah.”

She turned her decorated eyes toward the last few feathers of the former bird settling in the garden.

Benitez explained he had been sent by the US State Department to monitor regional developments in Kurdistan and Iraq.

“After the deal for Kurdistan independence was arranged, the Turks continued to scream they had the most to lose. They wanted concessions.”

“Meaning the northern half of Iraq,” Ellie ventured, “which follows the same Sunni form of Islam as the majority of Turkish people do.”

Running for her life had definitely improved her grasp of geopolitics.

“Iran, dominated by Shi’a Muslims, would annex the southern part of the former Iraq where that form of Islam dominates,” she concluded.

On the coffee table lay a fat illustrated volume titled *Biological and Chemical Weapons: Their Joys and Pitfalls*. No author was listed, though Ellie had a good idea who had written it. The cover was embossed with the same designs as the gold-and-silver tattoos Ms. China was sporting.

“How does Jordan fit in?” Sarge asked. “They’ve been US allies for years.”

“That was the Israeli prime minister’s idea,” Benitez said. “It was her view

that we could wait for the weak Hashemite monarchy to toddle on for a few more years or brush it aside now during this latest upheaval.”

“What would Israel gain from destabilizing one of the few countries it has a peace treaty with?”

“There are a lot of complicated—”

Ms. China cut off Benitez’s dithering. “Israel would gain the East Bank of the Jordan River,” she said. “Their occupation is in crisis. Conditions for two million people in Gaza have become so bad that the average Palestinian child there has more toxins in their body than we allow in pet food.

“Over here, the West Bank has nearly one million Jewish settlers. They are not going anywhere. In 2005, when Sharon forced 8,000 settlers out of Gaza, there was nearly civil war in Israel.

“If Israel wants to remain a Jewish majority state, it cannot absorb five million Arabs, let alone any who would demand the right to return from all over the world. Israel needs a place to send the Arabs it does not want. Jordan already has two million people who were originally from Greater Israel and is big enough to hold the rest.”

“The Administration reluctantly agreed to the plan,” Benitez said. “As long as law-abiding Palestinians were not forcibly deported. Unlike the mythical two-state solution, which pretends West Bank could be the Palestinian homeland, Jordan has all the infrastructure of a working country: airports, civil government.”

“Even if the Jordanian monarchy falls, can they just do that?” Ellie asked. “What about the native Jordanians?”

“Two-thirds of the population is Palestinian in origin. And Turkey quietly agreed not to disagree, for a price,” Benitez said. “Jordan and North Iraq would be put under a Turkish protectorate mandate, as it was under the old Ottoman Empire. This would put pressure on Syria and create a buffer zone against Iranian expansionism. Those are Turkey’s two main regional rivals. It was a nice plan.”

“Then things went in the crapper,” Sarge summed up.

“Really fast, too,” Benitez agreed. “We were still trying to work out how the Grey Wolves managed to hop the border from Jordan to the West Bank when we got a rather gruesome courier parcel. Inside was a tissue slide of a scientist’s brain.”

“Dr. Abner Avivi,” Ms. China said wistfully. “At Cambridge, he taught me biomolecular mechanics. I always admired his mind, so looking at it under an electron microscope was really intense.”

“The package was delivered with great secrecy by Boaz Baumann, who took over after the untimely death of Israel’s Minister of Defense. The source was unquestionable. The contents were beyond description.”

“Oh, let me,” Ms. China chirped. She held up a stylus, and the tip projected a picture on the near wall. “What was on Dr. Avivi’s mind, or rather in it, was this little creature.”

Ellie saw a magnified picture of a fat-headed worm with prongs all along its curled length.

“Here’s Khóshekh, the microorganism. It is named after the plague of darkness from the Book of Exodus. According to the germ warfare dossier, it’s a cross between encephalitis and smallpox. It has some nice features: stupendous lethality and an unpredictable asymptomatic incubation period yielding a racy R-naught infection replication rate rivalling the current non-engineered disease champ the measles. Also, Khóshekh can hop species; it’s particularly fond of cats. It stays dormant in felines until it finds a human victim. Then it blooms, liquefying *Homo sapiens*’ brain matter from the inside out.”

“Israel made this?” Ellie asked.

“They’ve got to destroy it,” Atticus said vehemently.

“About seventy-two hours ago, we demanded the entire stock of the virus be destroyed and all facilities be opened to inspectors,” Benitez said. “Prime Minister Drach responded by saying she had a Gottland-class stealth sub in

the North China Sea which was ready to send D5 Trident nuclear missiles to Shanghai, Tokyo, Mumbai, and Hawaii.”

“What are they thinking?” Sarge Bryan said.

“It’s not the first time a small country has tried to punch above its weight class,” Mr. Perdix said. “In World War II, Imperial Japan attacked Britain, India, China, and America, at the same time.”

“The Chinese were really torn up,” Benitez said. “They were hosting the Friendship Naval Exercises, in which the INS *Sica* was taking part. Beijing’s ambassador was on his way to the Knesset to lodge an urgent protest when his motorcade was blown up by insurgents.”

“Or someone,” Ms. China trilled viciously.

“I’m surmisin’ there’s a reason why Mr. Perdix was so eager to get us here,” Atticus said in a capable manly way that gave Ellie goosebumps.

“You surmise correctly,” Ms. China said. She rubbed her tattooed fingertips together, which gave the impression of letting off golden sparks of excitement. “Your mission—and you’ll really kick yourselves if you don’t accept it—is to capture Israel’s Prime Minister Drach and deliver her here for tort—” She caught herself, and said deliberately, “For an enhanced interview session.”

WESTERN WALL PLAZA**LIA**

The sun winked out beneath the horizon. The Old City of Jerusalem sank into darkness and madness.

The screams of jihadis cascading down from the Temple Mount was, for a moment, drowned out by amplified shofar ram's horn blasts from the side of the plaza opposite the Western Wall. Rising and falling martial sounds of the shevarim mixed with the staccato teruah blasts of alarm. Then those wailing, bellicose notes were punctured and overtaken by the sharp crack of gunfire. The Orthodox militias unleashed withering suppressive fire onto the thousands of Grey Wolves flooding into the square.

In the back of her mind, Lia knew something incalculably terrible had happened. In the moment, she could only think about her parents and friends. They all had to get out of the plaza.

Eruptions like demonic fireworks shot up from the Temple Mount. Big-bore mortars, fat bombs with a hundred kilos of explosive, were incoming. The blue-black sky was going to rain death.

Lia ducked as an IDF rifleman carelessly swung his weapon; she pointed the reservist toward the enemy and hoped her people had stayed by the bio-nuke tank.

She looked back. The gantry crane Rabbi Baumann had ascended was

crashing down. No one noticed. Pontoons had unfurled off the top of the Western Wall; so did rappelling ladders and ropes. At the remains of the Mughrabi Bridge, thousands of fighters crushed against each other to get down and attack the IDF and the Jewish militia in the plaza.

The first mortar round struck the paving stones of the plaza, well short of the line of troops. Tanks and armored vehicles started their engines. The biggest ones could survive a near miss, but shrapnel would decimate troops and civilians in the open.

She got closer to the mega-tank as Israeli aircraft pounded the Temple Mount. One was hit by an RPG or explosive-laden drone. The others backed off. Damaged helos could crash into the densely populated city and kill more people than a bomb.

A mortar hit somewhere on the other side of the bio-nuke tank. It barely wobbled.

Lia yelled, "Steph!"

Her foot caught on something; she looked, under her foot was a body. It belonged to the corporal she had yelled at earlier. His leg was caught under the wheel of an armored personnel carrier; he was unconscious. She yelled for a corpsman and banged on the door of the APC. There was nothing else she could do.

A furious salvo of mortars arced up from the Mount. Mobile countermeasures finally kicked in. C-RAM lasers and antimissile fire lanced out, trying to knock down the incoming fire. It was like watching bullets being hit by other bullets. Fiery debris rained down.

The antimissile rockets were fast but limited in number. The inaccurate but continuous mortar fire soon overwhelmed them. Bombs started hitting all along the Israeli lines. A fierce whining sound came from a Merkava tank as its main railgun charged up. It fired over and over without pause. *Thoom!*

A chunk was blasted from the wall.

Thoom!

Sparks burst from the dark dome of the al-Aqsa.

Thoom!

Nothing stopped the insurgents; the flow only increased.

Three or four stealth helicopters appeared, keeping to the eastern side. If they crashed, they would go down in the Arab neighborhoods. They raked the top of the Temple Mount with machine-gun fire. They launched missiles.

Antiaircraft fire with burning white phosphorous came up at the helos and planes. Multistage suicide drones rose up and zoomed in on targets. A big helicopter started burning in the air, trailing fire and smoke. It drifted off in the direction of the Mount of Olives.

Lia was desperate. She was about to try climbing on top of the big sinister tank to get a better look in the crowds.

“What’s happening?” It was her father’s voice. They had seen her before she noticed them.

“Keep your heads down!” Lia shouted.

Spencer and Steph were with them. She pushed her friends against the side of the mega-tank. Shell bursts, tracer rounds and rising smoke formed a cyclone of death around them. This was the eye of the storm. Centuries of pent-up bloodlust was being unleashed. The rolling fetid fog coming from the destroyed dome reached them. She felt like retching. The cloying walls of doom were closing in.

“Stick together,” Lia said, coughing. She grabbed her parents’ arms and pressed them through a gap in the military vehicles. “We’ve got to move.”

Had it not been for the support fire from the Orthodox Jewish militia, the IDF lines would have been overrun. Thousands of Grey Wolves and their allies had surged down from the Mount. The covered inflatable pontoon slides hanging off the wall were resisting small-arms fire. They had been planning this for months, for years. On the Mount were fifty thousand square feet of underground space no Jew was allowed to set foot in. There was enough space to arm and supply several divisions of infantry.

From the east side of the plaza, concentrated deadly fire erupted. All along the Western Wall, insurgent figures were hit and fell six stories down. A few mortars arced up from the Mount and hit the Jewish Quarter, but the stone buildings were thick and defiant.

The withering fusillade from Jehdeiah and his allies forced the Grey Wolves to take cover. That gave Lia a very bad feeling. The fighters on the Mount had not yet used their most devastating weapon.

To the south, the plaza was bounded by turnstiles. These had been dismantled to let the armored column through. Lia pulled and pushed her people in that direction. Then she stopped. Escaping through the Moroccan Gate was the obvious choice. That was also where the large Palestinian neighborhood of Silwan was.

How many military-aged males were there? How many were enraged they had not been invited to join the Grey Wolves on the Mount? How many were just waiting to sport-kill Jews or allies of Israel?

“This way,” Lia yelled to her small group, pulling Steph in a different direction. “Stay low.”

To the right of the turnstiles into the plaza, there were terraces and sheltered streets. The countermeasures from the Israeli lines were dwindling. The relentless blasts of mortar bombs pounded the open ground of the plaza.

“What happened?” Lia’s father said, holding her by the shoulder. “Where’s the rabbi?”

No time to explain or hesitate. Delays would get them all killed.

“We’ve got to get out of this firefight. I think that security guy on the wall got to the rabbi.”

She did not say that man was David. Behind them came a low rumble and a screeching of crushed metal. The bio-nuke behemoth was rolling over the last standing turnstiles on its way down the hill.

“In that alley,” Lia directed. “Now!”

Residential real estate around the plaza was some of the most expensive in

all Jerusalem. Small apartments with a view of the Wall cost millions of shekels. The occupants never thought they would be at ground zero of the worst fighting since 1948.

Lia was the last through a portico. Wind chimes hanging from it rattled a harsh discord. A poster placard fluttered by. It landed at her feet, then was under her feet, Lia read it. It was in English and stamped with a Christian Evangelical symbol:

EVERY MAN MUST CARRY
HIS OWN HIDE TO THE TANNER

When the thermal bombs went off in the plaza, the poster and everything not nailed or welded down blew through the sheltered alley with a roar of acrid heat.

They were far enough inside the residential area to escape direct damage. The plaza was turned into an open-air furnace. Gusts of dry heat and debris followed them. All around Lia, gates and security shutters were sealed tight. On a balcony above, a lone light was quickly quenched.

Lia thought about banging on a door. If David or the rabbi were with them, it might work. But one look at them—four Arabs and a disheveled white man—there was no way they would be let in. They might even be shot.

Lia had no gun. *Dumb*. She should have picked up a weapon. With the shells raining down, there had not been time. Maybe she would not need one. The twisting pedestrian passageways were isolated enough.

Empty stairwells twisted up left and right behind iron gates. She could not help feeling any sense of security was false. Just as jackals and vultures will circle the fight between lions and water buffalo, human hyenas will take advantage of any chaos.

They stopped and caught their breath in a small dark square centered around a bubbling fountain. Lia checked everyone for bullet holes. None.

“What do you think?” Lia asked her parents. They knew the city better.

“Back through the Armenian sector.” Her father was adamant.

“Not out?”

The tiny Tanner’s Gate was close.

“Too close to Silwan and Abu Tor,” her father said, tasting the water from the fountain. “Most of the Arab fighters on the Mount probably came from there as well as the Palestinian refugee camps.”

“They’ve been demolishing Arab houses there for decades,” Steph said. “By myself I might have a chance, if they overlooked my five o’clock shadow. But Jews, Christians, foreigners, especially Americans?” She shook her head. “You’d be dead meat. Sorry, Spencer.”

Spencer shrugged at his wife. He seemed too shell-shocked to say anything.

“Okay,” Lia said. “Back through the Armenian Quarter. Then we’ll check who has control of the Zion Gate.”

Behind Lia, the big streetlight flickered, and something scuttled across the mouth of the dark alley. She turned. Too late to catch it. No telling what it was. A large rodent or a piece of windblown trash. Nothing revealed itself.

“Let’s go up here.” She pointed to a winding public staircase rising among the silent stone houses.

“More stairs?” Steph said, aghast.

“Drink up,” Mr. Suleiman said, dipping his hand in the fountain. “I fear all the cafés have closed early.”

They climbed, heaving themselves up the set of steps to a courtyard. Somehow the elevation made Lia feel better. As though there was some invisible dank mist they could rise above, if they only climbed high enough.

“Here’s some juice cups,” Spencer said. He was making himself useful by digging through a trash bin.

“Wash them in the next fountain and take some water,” Lia said.

The Old City throbbed with pain in the gathering gloom. Each explosion and distant volley of gunfire seemed to make the limestone walls shudder.

Lia's mother puffed beside her and kept climbing. "What happened to the Dome of the Rock?"

"Destroyed. No telling who did it."

Extremists had blown up holy places before, but only when they were losing a battle to prevent it from falling into enemy hands.

Her mother put a wet cloth on her father's head. "There'll be trouble over that, mark my word."

That was the understatement of the millennium.

"Look," Spencer said, pointing up and ahead. "There's a steeple."

Lia followed his line of sight through the narrow winding street.

"The Cathedral of Saint James. That's right in the Armenian Quarter," Mr. Suleiman said.

"Can we get to it?" Spencer said. "Christians don't seem to be in the fighting."

"We hope," Mr. Suleiman said. "A bullet does not ask your religion before it hits you."

Lia doused some water over her own head. It was surprisingly cool. She and David had gone to Rome once, where there had been thousands of fountains. None of those seemed as precious as these small unadorned oases.

They were near the invisible border between the Jewish and Armenian areas. Maybe all of the Old City would fall to the Grey Wolves insurgents. Lia could not imagine the Knesset parliament complex being in danger.

They were closest to the Zion Gate. If they did not like the look of the people in charge, they would head the longer way around back to Jaffa. General Behar's forces had been firmly entrenched there.

"We'll pass by the Armenian church," Lia said.

Dehydration and adrenaline withdrawal were catching up with her. She stared at a shopfront and shivered. The evening wind blew hollowly through the narrow walkway. She was suddenly chilled.

"Go quietly," Lia said. "There may be looters. There's plenty of valuables

and gold to steal inside the cathedral.”

In front of her was a shop that sold locally made jewelry. The shop’s thick laminate glass windows were barred inside and out. The shop’s slogan was “Take a Piece of the Mount with you.”

Lia’s ears were ringing from the explosions of the mortars in the plaza, and there was a foul taste in the back of her throat that water could not wash away. Something like gunpowder, but fouler. She did not even want to think that the air might contain bits of exploded people.

She felt herself becoming light-headed. Lia caught herself against the wall of the shop, making sure the others did not see her. They would lose confidence in her leadership. She had to focus her eyes on something. In the jewelry shop window, there was a sign.

It said:

“All our beautiful gifts and keepsakes are made containing stones from Mount Moriah, the biblical name of the Temple Mount.

“Stones were illegally removed by the Islamic Waqf and dumped in a landfill garbage site. This was specifically done to discredit Jewish claims to the site now occupied by the Al-Aqsa mosque.

“Israeli archaeologists sifted through the material and found coins and other relics from the time of the First and Second Jewish Temples. These were taken to museums. The remaining stones from the excavation are now in broaches, rings, and pendants, for sale at very reasonable prices. Telepresence orders welcome.”

In this city, even jewelry had a conflict story, Lia thought.

“Let’s find your friends and be on our way,” her father said, slapping his chest with one hand. “I’ve got my second wind back.”

“Find them?” Lia asked, coming sharply back to her senses. “Where did they...?”

A scream that was scarcely human pierced the night. It came from the direction of the cathedral.

UNDER THE WESTERN WALL

DAVID

As David crawled forward in the dark tunnel a jagged piece of the Western Wall slammed into his forehead. He felt but did not hear the impact; all sounds inside the rough-hewn three-by-four-foot tunnel were doused by the roar of tritium thermal bombs igniting one after the other in the plaza. Tongues of fire slid through the cracks in the stone. The steel hatch behind them turned orange hot. The outer bolts melted and dripped down. The deadly glow was the only light; then, it too failed.

The concussions stopped; the space they were in did not collapse. But where were they? It seemed like the rabbi had pulled a magic trick. It took David a second to think. They had to be *underneath* the Western Wall. Excavations? Archaeologists were always exploring, gathering scientific evidence that Jews had lived in Jerusalem since biblical times.

The place was disorientingly dark. Sand rained down on the back of his neck; some stuck to sweat and blood there. He realized the thousand-ton blocks above him might shift and obliterate this narrow chasm. They had to move; he bumped into something soft. His father's butt.

"They—*heff*—they weren't supposed to use thermal bombs," David said, gasping. "Not allowed onto the Mount."

"We'll have to file a complaint," the rabbi said. He was also out of breath,

but calmer.

David cough-laughed. Some cinder-tasting thing came out. It felt good to be rid of it. He checked himself. He felt his ribs move weirdly in his sides, but he could still crawl.

“Where are we?”

David had lost nearly everything else in the fast rope down from the top of the wall. He checked one ripped pocket after another. In his leg pouch, he found the borrowed handset; the screen was cracked, but the tiny LED bulb on the back worked as a weak flashlight.

“I told you to study archaeology.” Apparently the rabbi was not about to let Israel’s next big war keep him from pointing out David’s educational failings. “This is the famous tunnel under the Wall. The Waqf complained about it, so they stopped working on it, but they never filled it in.”

“Lia?”

“I saw her,” his father said from up ahead as they inched along.

“We have to...”

“She’s with Prime Minister Drach’s people. They’ll get out. I’m sure of it.”

The rabbi did not sound sure.

David was certain the metal doorway they had crawled through was welded shut; they were not getting out that way. Yet he took heart. The blond thug Eli Weissach was at the top of the Shin Bet food chain. They would have more than one way to get Lia out of Jerusalem.

The dim ray of white artificial light from the phone stabbed only a few meters ahead. The dusty coarsely hewn tunnel reminded David of ones he had been inside of under Gaza and Lebanon.

“David, how did you find me?”

“Lia,” David said. He crawled over a car-battery-sized stone that had fallen from the ceiling. “Somehow a signal got through. I knew she was in Musrara, and the fighting was pushing her and her parents into the Old City and the Wall.”

The rabbi's bulk made the tunnel seem impassable.

"Just a moment," he wheezed and stopped.

David was on the verge of collapse. His palms hurt so much he was using the back of his wrists to crawl.

"Lia. Yes," the rabbi said. "I met her at Jaffa Gate. Quite a surprise for us both. David, the Waqf sheikh was the best hope for a cease-fire. Do you think there's any chance...?"

"If the fall didn't kill him, the knives in his back and the thermal explosions did."

"He was the only person the mob might listen to. The very bad people knew that. Just this afternoon, he survived a car-bomb attack that killed the other members of his family."

"I've been a bit out of touch," David said.

He wanted to ask about Boaz. By now, there must be an official alert. Even in the middle of Grey Wolves intifada, two hijacked nukes would get red-hot attention. That could wait until they were out in the open.

"What's happening? Are lines of communication being re-established? Is Drach's office keeping strategic command and control?"

"You know, son, twenty years ago, the chief rabbi would not know of such things." Rabbi Baumann wiped his face with a handkerchief and signaled he was ready to move on. "But thanks to Orthodox politics, I'm one of the Big Five in the cabinet."

"So?" David said as they pushed through to a larger space, where the archaeologists had cleared out a cavern about five feet high. "Are you going to make me read about it in the *Post*?"

"At first it was thought the Iranians were responsible."

"Fucking them up would have been easy," David said. "Bomb their tank columns entering Iraq until they cry uncle."

"That might have been the plan, then Jordan fell, then Jericho, Hebron," said the rabbi. "In the north, Haifa and Nazareth went up in flames. Before

we knew it, insurgents from the Territories broke through the Green Line walls and linked with militants in Gaza. As the fighting threatened to reach Tel Aviv, the cabinet initiated Red Dawn civil defense.

“The plan was to contain the hostilities to small areas until air power and tanks could isolate the enemy. General Behar and the military leaders were shocked; before they knew what was happening, we’d lost more territory than in the 1973 war. The enemy has much more mobility than they could have imagined.”

David reminded himself to ask Miss Aleph what Big Aleph was doing while Israel was being overrun.

“What about Mother?”

Mrs. Baumann was very private and made no public appearances.

“She’s with Rabbi Gabriel. After Ben Gurion Airport was hit, they decided to take relatives of cabinet ministers to the Navy base in Haifa. If need be, they will go to Greece.”

“Is it that bad?”

The rabbi snorted. “Look at us. We’re crawling away from a mob through an excavation tunnel under the Western Wall. ‘Is it that bad?’ he asks.” His father peered at him from underneath bushy eyebrows covered with blood and soot. “But, David, you haven’t asked about one person.”

“Boaz.”

“Things... are not what they seem. It’s very complicat—”

Without warning, a part of the ceiling gave way. The implosion of the Dome, the thermobaric explosions in the plaza; it was a wonder this burrow had survived. The rabbi’s right arm and leg were instantly covered by loose orange-brown dirt. He was being buried and crushed.

“Crap!”

David jammed his phone-flashlight in his mouth and dug. He could not keep up; sand was filling the chamber too fast. Beams had fallen across the way forward. Panic had finally overtaken his father. As half his head was

covered by caving sand, the rabbi gesticulated wildly to the side wall to the left of them.

“Kotel mall!”

A falling rock smacked into David’s check; the flashlight fell out of his mouth and was immediately covered by sand.

“What?”

“Ko—” His father’s voice was cut off in the darkness; the cave-in was suffocating him.

David finally understood. His father had not been panicking. He prayed his gloves had some hydraulic power left in them. With a motion that cracked the scabs and blisters on his palm, he pumped his fist. Drawing back as far as he could, he punched the two-by-four beams along the left side.

He flailed in the dark at the thin slices of light coming through the wooden slats. David’s leg got caught under the dirt raining down. The cave-in gathered momentum. He could barely extend his arm for a third, fourth, and fifth Iron Palm strike.

The wood broke before the bones in his forearm did. He pushed his head through. Reaching back, he dragged the rabbi after him.

Lit by emergency chemlights, the wide new cavern was quiet and clean in a madly surreal way. A sign hung from a mall vendor’s mobile cart:

“Value for the Ages: Silver Kotel (Western Wall) Necklace Pendant with Tanzanite Hamsa \$40.00.”

“I told you,” the rabbi said, coughing, pulling himself the rest of the way through the gap in the wooden boards. The splinter-lined gap spewed dirt after him as though in pursuit. “Spend more time in Jerusalem. This is the tourist tunnel that parallels the archaeological excavations.”

“Saved by a tourist trap,” David whispered. He sat down on a bench in the underground mall, remaining wary. This place might have been infiltrated.

“Don’t worry,” the rabbi said, noticing him looking up and down the corridors. “This is the first place Shin Bet secured when they lost control of

the Temple Mount.”

“Oh, *alte rebbe*,” a rough male voice said from behind them.

David jumped up, or tried to; his legs wobbled underneath him. The stranger spoke with a Russian accent.

“I would start with the worrying now.”

David looked up into the wide ugly muzzles of two Streetsweeper shotguns.

**BRITISH CONSULATE ANNEX
JERUSALEM****ELLIE**

Oh, now that's just bonkers, Ellie thought. After arriving at the creepy consulate, she had been hoping for a ride back to London in a private jet with an on-board nail spa. Instead, their next mission was to kidnap Israel's prime minister.

By all accounts, Israel's head of state was due for more than just an abduction. Prime Minister Drach had been mucking about with very dangerous biological weapons. However, she was the most highly guarded person in the country.

Ms. China flicked her stylus, and the wall picture changed to a building marked *Knesset*. There were blue and green lines fanning out from the central building.

"These are Raven Rock-level command and control bunkers. Each one is designed to survive a generalized H-bomb attack on Jerusalem. Drach could be in any one of them. Only the local subroutine of the IDF's AI would know where."

"Can we get to him?" Mr. Perdix asked, addressing their artificial person, who was sitting on the coffee table.

"No chance. Big Aleph is dumb but loyal."

"At Hadassah we heard there were peace talks going on near the Western

Wall,” Ellie said, trying to be cheery. “Maybe the war will be over and everyone will return to reason.”

Ms. China’s peal of laughter reminded her of a derisive cockatoo.

“Sorry, Ellie,” she said. Her grinning made the microscopic glitter embedded in her skin shimmer. “That’s just so precious, so naïve. No, no. Rumors of peace have been greatly exaggerated. Quite the opposite, in fact.”

“Sorry,” Ellie said. She was determined to prove she was woke, or with it, or whatever the opposite of bloody naïve was these days. “Aren’t we allies with Israel? Isn’t there some other way to achieve our objectives besides snatching their head of state?”

The woman from MI6’s Black Ops division rolled her tattooed eyeballs.

“Nope,” she said. “Khóshekh is a plague of biblical proportions. We gave Minister Drach a chance to repent. Instead of cooperating, she has threatened some really nasty nuclear business.”

Atticus, Nobu, and Sarge Bryan looked skeptical. Mr. Perdix supported his colleague from Britain.

“Israel and the US have always had strained relations when it comes to nuclear weapons,” he said. “There was one point in 1962 when President Kennedy was prepared to look the other way while Soviets bombed the secret Israeli bomb-making facility at Dimona to prevent nuclear proliferation.”

“That’s only rumor,” Miss Aleph piped up.

Backtalk from the patriotic AI agitated the DARPA man; he continued in a more strident tone.

“In 1967, the *American* ship USS *Liberty* was napalmed and torpedoed by Israel. As sailors escaped, their lifeboats were machine gunned. Thirty-four Americans were killed by Israeli soldiers.”

“That was an accident.”

“In 1946, the future Prime Minister Menachem Begin blew up a hotel, killing ninety-one people, mostly British.”

“He apologized.”

“In 1948, more than 750,000 Palestinian Arabs were expelled from their

homes and not allowed to return after the war of independence. They call it the Nakba, the Cataclysm.”

“That was done as humanely as possible and is the only reason Israel is a Jewish-majority state. Also, Mr. Perdix, the 1948 war never ended.”

“In 1979, Israel and apartheid South Africa exploded a nuclear bomb in the South Atlantic.”

“Allegedly.”

The rather timid-looking man from the US State Department sat quietly opposite the group. Mr. Benitez looked like he would rather be anywhere else.

“Enough talk,” Miss China said. “You Army fellows are men of action. Here’s your chance. Act.”

Atticus huddled with the Sarge and Nobu. Ellie felt she had to be neutral. Firstly, because she represented the *Citizen Juggernaut*, and secondly, because she had very little clue as to what was going on.

Distant high-pitched shouts came from the garden. Through the gazebo windows, Ellie could see the garden wall and gate. It took her a second to realize she was hearing the preteen voices of boys bent on minor mischief.

Of the six little marauders, one stopped by the gate and pushed the vines aside. A small chubby and wary face pressed through the greenery. They had no idea this sylvan garden was Ms. China’s personal deathtrap.

Ellie had seen what happened to the bird which had been skewered near the fountain. Who knew what snares and poison darts were hidden among the vines and bushes. She was about to say something when the other kids yelled at the small intruder. With reluctance, he withdrew. The vines closed again.

Ms. China joined her by the window.

“The locals think this house is haunted.” The microscopic golden whorls around the odd woman’s cheek dimples crimped inward. “They’re right.”

“What use is a horrible biological weapon like this mutant smallpox?” Ellie asked. “Wouldn’t it kill everyone?”

“Throughout history,” Ms. China said, “diseases have proven to be the best

way of getting rid of unwanted indigenous populations. “The American West wasn’t won with a six gun. Huge numbers of Native Americans were intentionally wiped out by biological warfare. Before the explorer Cortés arrived in South America, there were thirty million indigenous Aztec tribespeople. Fifty years later, only three million remained.

“During the Second World War, the Japanese infected Chinese with cholera, anthrax, and bubonic plague, resulting in at least 400,000 civilian deaths.”

Ms. China’s tattooed eyes studied the image of the horrible germ on the screen. The highly magnified tissue slide had caught it munching on the brain cells of a famous scientist.

“The key element of this class of weapon is making sure the user’s population is immune.”

“You mean...” Sarge Bryan’s eyes glowed larger and more intensely. “They were fixin’ to release this plague inside Israel? On their own people?”

“Depends how you define ‘own people,’ Sergeant,” Mr. Perdix said. “The Grey Wolves’ attack is perfect cover. The genocidal Jewish extremists, the Daggers of Ehad, can blame the bioweapon attack on any of the dozen states that have sworn to destroy Israel for the last eighty years. It all requires the availability of an effective cure. Is there one?”

“According to the scientific files collected by the late Defense Minister Yossi, there was,” Ms. China said.

“Not is?”

The female scientist shook her head. “Our little wriggler has mutated. That’s one of the many questions we have for Prime Minister Drach, when you bring her here.”

Atticus studied the diagram of the Knesset bunkers.

“That complex is impossible to breach.”

“For once, I have to agree with the captain,” Mr. Perdix said.

Ms. China blew a strand of her long hair away from her pale oval face.

“You gents must adopt a more positive attitude. Because of Drach’s threats, India and the People’s Republic of China—both nuclear powers—have threatened to act pre-emptively.”

The State Department man Benitez finally spoke. “We’ve got a really narrow window of opportunity. Washington has promised to resolve the situation one way or another.”

“What’s the backup in case we cannot get Drach?” Nobu asked. “The *Obama* carrier strike group is nearby. They could launch bunker-busting MOABs.”

Atticus stared at the maps on the screens. “That is the *Sica* in the South China Sea. Israel has another nuclear sub, the *Magen*. Where is it?”

A blue dot appeared in the Mediterranean.

“It’s a Gottland-class stealth sub as well. It could launch a nuclear cruise missile and take out the entire Six Fleet without warning.”

Even Ellie could tell they were playing with nuclear fire. The only person not fazed was Ms. China.

“Our Plan B is a little more elaborate.” She smirked; it must be her plan. “We’re not going to launch the bunker-busting nuke to take out Minister Drach in her Knesset bunkers; we’ve already launched it, way back in the 1980s. It’s waiting in orbit.”

The picture changed to a shot of the region from space.

“Israel’s missile defense is too sophisticated for normal conventional or nuclear assault. We figured the only way to be sure of killing Drach via a decapitating strike is to use an ultra hypersonic deep-penetrating attack method: a space-based re-entry vehicle.”

“You activated Thor?” Mr. Perdix said, looking a little jealous. “Is the C-SCAN atomic navigation system working?”

“Oh yes.” Ms. China took obvious delight in telling her colleague about his own weapons system.

Ellie was glad Atticus and even Nobu looked confused.

“You want to clue us grunts in?”

“You remember Star Wars? Not the films,” Mr. Perdix said, “the much more interesting militarization of Low Earth Orbit during the Cold War by NATO and the Soviets?”

“That was abandoned,” Atticus said.

“Right.” Ms. China chuckled. “NATO never had to disclose it because it was never activated. In the 1980s and 1990s, we and the Russians built kinetic orbital-strike weapons.”

The picture on the screen showed satellites with huge rods attached to them, pointing down.

“They are solid metal rods which, when dropped from orbit, have a similar effect to a B-61 earth-penetrating weapon without radioactive fallout,” Ms. China said, like a salesperson pitching a wireless plan. “It’s the Green Apocalypse, and it’s high time we reactivated it. President Ronald Reagan named the system ‘Rods from God,’ mostly to wind up the ungodly commies.”

Miss Aleph chimed in.

“Author and Boeing scientist Jerry Pournelle invented the Thor system. The rods themselves are about the size of a telephone pole, mostly solid tungsten alloy.”

“Thank you, Miss Trivia,” Ms. China said.

“Ms. China.” Mr. Perdix stared at the woman with unabashed admiration and attraction. “Why did we ever stop working together?”

Ellie found their ardor only slightly less creepy than necrophilia.

“We stopped working together because you, Augustine Aloysius, are a pussy,” Ms. China said, closing the distance between them. Her fingernails glinted, their sharp edges coated with something green. She stroked the chin of Mr. Perdix’s suddenly wan and recalcitrant face. “You chose Adaptive Execution Division and Senate oversight over unbridled destruction of the lives of villains. I will never forgive you.”

“Oh.”

“Right-o, Team Mockingbird, you’ve got...” Ms. China checked a digital

clock on her thumb ring. “Eight hours. That is the deadline China, Japan, and India have set for you to bring the prime minister here.

“After that, NATO is launching the entire arsenal of twelve space-based warheads on the Knesset parliament bunkers. In seven hours, fifty-nine minutes, we’re bringing the tungsten hammer down on that crazy bitch Drach.”

Sarge’s steadily glowing blue eyes stared at the Israeli handset. “Can we trust Miss Aleph?”

“After I went out of my way to save you? Look who’s paranoid.”

“This room is signals secure,” Ms. China said, picking up a pair of bolt cutters. She approached the AI’s newly repaired exterior case. “I’ve always wanted to do brain surgery on an AI.”

“I have every reason to think Miss Aleph is on our side,” Mr. Perdix said. “It was only with her help I was able to get through to Ms. China and plan this rendezvous.”

“I am IDF hardware and software. I’ve been wired since inception to preserve the lives of Israeli citizens and minimize collateral damage. The prime minister is insane. Therefore, my duty is to help you capture her, waterboard her, and tear out her—”

“Thanks,” Ms. China said, putting down the bolt cutters. “The humans know what to do once we have her.”

Over by a large aquarium, Nobu played with a goldfish swimming in murky water. When he tapped on the glass, its eyes lit up, and all over its body, large spines erupted and spewed black goop from needle-sharp quills.

“Can we get back to the ‘how’ part of the mission?” Atticus said.

“If you follow these guidelines, Prime Minister Drach will stop at nothing to meet with *you*.” Ms. China handed a data stylus to Mr. Perdix. “Some divine intervention can’t hurt, so we’re sending you to church. In fact, *the* Church.”

**ARMENIAN QUARTER
JERUSALEM****LIA**

The gut-wrenching shrieks were coming from St. James Cathedral. Lia could not tell who was screaming, Steph or Spencer. The sound reverberated starkly though the brick-walled alleyway.

She quickly motioned for her parents to stay quiet. They moved into a shadowy corner of the courtyard opposite the small fountain. Water gurgled softly. Above and around, all the windows and doors were shut tightly against the violence that was seeping in, thicker than darkness, through every crack of the Old City.

Lia peered down the zigzagging path up to the Christian church. She cursed herself for having no weapon. She looked around. This expensive neighborhood was too damn clean. There were no loose bricks or metal bars lying around.

She crept forward, her heart pounding with every step. Her urge was to take her parents and flee back to the open part of the city. Back to the gate. Maybe soldiers there could help. At least she could get a gun.

But she could not just leave her friends. She had taken Steph and her husband away from Tel Aviv into the depths of the fighting. She had to try to save them.

From who?

At the final corner, she risked a glance. She got an answer. In a courtyard next to the large Armenian cathedral was a roving band of young punks. Lia ducked back behind a wall.

These guys were not part of the organized fighting; they would be unpredictable and more dangerous. There were seven or eight of them. She guessed their ages at between twelve and twenty. They had hit Spencer; he was holding his head. The punks had shoved him to his knees. Two others had Steph pushed up against a wall.

On the other side of the cathedral courtyard was a small gate hanging off broken hinges. The small mob was intent on vandalism and robbery. They had only been stopped by the St. James' heavy main doors and barred windows. As they had been wondering how to break in, Steph and Spencer had wandered by.

The punks had iron bars, hammers, and knives. If only she had a gun, even a revolver. She could only peer at the scene from the shadows. A medium-sized aggressive youth seemed to be the leader.

"You!" he yelled at Spencer in bad English. "You American fuck pig?"

Spencer did not understand this was a question, so the punk hit him on the shoulder with a pipe. He groaned and fell hard on the cobblestones.

"Hold him down," the gang leader said, wandering over to a huge wooden chair carved in the shape of a saint. He sat on it like it was a throne and gestured to Steph. "Who that is? Some fucking whore for your American cock?"

While they were concentrating on their prisoners, Lia thought. She could not place these young hoodlums right away. If she could figure out their faction, she might have a chance to use the only weapon she had left: words.

The smallest one had a checkered keffiyeh; he was an Arab, almost certainly Muslim. A chubby guy gripping a metal bat had a Druze symbol, a five-pointed multicolored star, on his baseball cap. The leader was wearing a

Via Dolorosa T-shirt; only a Christian would wear that in the Old City. These must be dregs and outcasts of Jerusalem's criminal underbelly. They were not wanted or trusted by the other gangs.

Lia gripped her IDF identification tightly. All their lives, these little turds had lived in fear of the IDF and Border Police. Each of them had probably had the shit kicked out of them by Israelis. They believed Jews could kill or cripple them with impunity. If she moved quickly and convinced them she was Jewish, they might falter just long enough for her to—

“Got you, bitch,” a voice snarled from behind her. Lia felt the jagged metal end of a club dig into her cheek just below her ear.

She had not heard a thing. Her hearing had been dulled by concussive blasts of mortars and heavy machine guns. One of these hoodlums must have snuck around from behind using a route only these street rats knew. The end of the pipe bit into her skin and through. She felt blood trickle down her collar, yet it was feeling like an idiot that hurt most.

Three more punks came up the stairs. They pushed her parents ahead of them.

“Hey, Faisal!” the guy with the club said. “We got two old farts and a dirty Jew slut.”

That made eleven enemies. In this confined space, it was suicide to resist. The odds were too overwhelming. All five of them could be stomped to death in a minute. No matter who was watching, no matter who they called, there would be no first responders incoming. In the holiest of cities on Earth, tonight everyone was on their own. She and her parents were herded into the rectangular courtyard.

They shoved Lia into a harsh circle of light cast by a single dangling fluorescent bulb. Spencer started to say something. Lia shook her head. If they knew they were together, their captors would have even more leverage.

“What?” one of the punks yelled at Spencer. “You were say something? Maybe offer us money from cash machine? All broken. Only ATM working

is *you*. Out with pockets. Now!”

They started searching Steph for valuables.

“Hey, that’s my wife,” Spencer mumbled. A knobby bit jutted out under the skin of his cheek; his jaw was probably broken.

As they dragged her along, Lia got a fleeting look at the locks on the back of the church. Some were big old rusty ones that had been there since the Ottoman period. A smaller doorway had a blinking light and a keypad. What she, her parents, and two friends had in their pockets was nothing compared to the gold ornaments inside the cathedral. Maybe there were monks on the other side with cudgels. There had to be a way she could entice them inside the cathedral.

“Hey, Faisal,” Lia said in Arabic to the guy as he got up off the big chair. “I’m not a Jew. I’m Christian. They made me join the IDF after I got caught stealing. The judge said prison or Army, you choose. I can help you get inside the church.”

Unfortunately, Faisal was a wily street thug. He found her IDF wallet.

“Oh yeah, *Baumann*? Did they force you to marry a Jew as well? Filthy whore.”

He drew back to hit her. Before he could, she said, “I can hack open that door.”

Lia hoped she had not lost the black cat’s locket. Wherever it came from, if it could unlock a Green Line checkpoint gate, it could certainly defeat civilian electronic locks.

“Just let me try,” Lia begged.

Faisal looked at her, then at the locked passageway. Behind it was more gold and jewels than they could possibly carry. He had to let her try.

“Hey!” the fat guy who was holding Steph said. “She has no tits!”

“Don’t be disgusting. Just rob her.”

“There’s something wrong. She... she doesn’t feel like a woman.”

“When have you ever felt a woman, Usman?”

“Yeah, besides your grandma?”

Steph yelled again. Lia raged helplessly. This was savage; she, her parents, her friends were just bags of meat to be ripped at by these human hyenas.

“Somethings not right...” Usman said, continuing his examination of Steph. “Ahhhgh!”

The big brute jumped back like he’d been stung.

“She... it has a dick.” He gasped quietly.

Spencer tried to break free. The youths were quicker. Metal bars thumped him. He slid back, bleeding, eyes rolling.

“Let me see.”

Faisal was transfixed. “I know what this is. It’s *almutahawil jinsiaan*! The only things more disgusting than Israeli Jews. Hold it down.”

The smallest punk had a cheap plastic mask over his face. It was the character from the *Clockwork Orange* movie with a black top hat and one eye covered in full mascara. He also had a knife, one that was too big for him. Faisal grabbed it.

“Its parents should have killed it.” The gang leader let out a high-pitched laugh.

“But...” Big Usman was over his initial shock and trying to work things through. “The American said she... er, it... was his wife. How’s that?”

“Don’t you know anything? They hire doctors to cut their man parts off. They save for years and go to Europe or America to have it done.”

Faisal leaned over a petrified Stephanie.

“Is that what your plan was? Sucking and fucking this poor dumb faggot American so you could get your dick chopped off?”

Lia saw the young men working themselves into a frenzy. Gold, cash, cars, nothing she could offer them would turn them away from their terrible intent. Their strongest craving was to see something strange suffer.

“You’re in luck, you perverted freak,” Faisal said, holding the knife. The blade, though rusty, gleamed in the bleak fluorescent light. It curved forward

to a delicate hook-blade point. “My parents are always telling me to go to medical school. They need doctors everywhere. You can be my first patient.”

Steph started to scream. The outraged and disgusted Usman put a big-booted foot on her mouth. Her sobs were reduced to gurgling wails.

“Hold it down.”

They pushed Steph’s dress up.

You can’t...

Before Lia could think the unthinkable, a big spurt of blood arced up from Steph’s groin. Rendered flesh was thrown like a sloppy wet rag against the wall of the cathedral. The gush settled down and became a stream which flowed, ichor dark, in the harsh light of the bare dangling bulb.

The young thugs were silent. Maybe they were shocked at how simple emasculation was, with the right tools and a helpless victim.

Faisal was not done.

“You don’t have a pussy yet. How can you be a bitch without a pussy?” He did not wait for a reply from the unconscious and limp Steph. He stabbed.

Everyone was so transfixed at the spectacle that Spencer nearly got away. He might have if he had not tried to help Steph.

“Ahhh!” He pulled them and yelled through blood and broken teeth. The boys rounded on him, kicked his legs out from under him, and stomped him unconscious.

“What do you mean they fuck?” Usman inquired, as though the question had just surfaced to the top of his thuggish brain.

“Like two male beasts,” Faisal said. “Of course, they won’t be doing that anymore. Or... maybe...”

He grabbed a straight K-bar bayonet knife from Usman’s belt.

“Maybe they can have one last roll in the hay. Pull the American’s pants down.”

After some arguing between them as to who would commit this mildly homosexual chore, the small guy in the *Clockwork Orange* mask undid

Spencer's pants. Faisal jammed the handle of the K-bar inside the horrific wound he had made between Steph's legs.

"There," he said with satisfaction. "Now you have a cock again. One that will never go soft. Let's go use it on your husband."

They flopped the insensible body of Steph on top of Spencer.

"There, is that deep enough for you? I bet it's the best you've ever had, you perverts. How does that—"

Faisal's jesting was interrupted by the slamming open of the basement door. A medium-sized monk came out. He held an over-and-under shotgun nearly as long as he was tall. Under the shadow of his cassock's hood, his teeth were bared, and spittle sprayed from his beard-rimmed mouth as he spoke.

"Duk' keghtot gazanneri!"

His first load of pellets hit the Clockwork Orange runt in the shoulder and arm; he spun and fell.

For a large guy, Usman was plenty fast. He grabbed the barrel of the gun and cracked the Armenian monk with his elbow. Unfortunately, Usman was not so swift in his thinking. Had he been, he might have noticed the second barrel was loaded before he used the firearm like a club to hit the monk. As the butt hit the prone man's head, the second barrel discharged, sending what little brains Usman had all over the small courtyard.

Undeterred, Faisal saw the way into the cathedral.

"Stop the door from closing!"

Someone jammed open the heavy door.

"No witnesses. Kill these others." Faisal looked at Lia with covetous loathing. "I'll do this one. I like her hair. Her scalp will look good on my belt."

Her head yanked back. Lia was looking up at the brute's hairless chin and buck teeth as she felt the hooked knife dig in under her ear. Faisal turned to the others. "You see, we did right. Now we get our rewa—"

With the sound of a cork popping out of a bottle, a suppressed round went through Faisal's mouth. He fell like a puppet who had just had his strings cut. The hand gripping her hair went slack. Two more corpses fell, threatening to pin her. She kicked away.

Suppressed rounds. Very accurate. She had been in enough Delta Force training scenarios; Lia knew what was going down.

"Mom, Dad! Stay where you are. Don't move. Lie flat."

The small courtyard was cleared in seconds. Whispers of suppressed barrels and subsonic ammo were punctuated by the click-clack of caseless rounds chambering.

Thirty seconds later, Lia struggled to her feet and looked around. Among her armed rescuers, the only figure not wearing a full-face mask had close-shorn blond hair and a blueish scar across his scalp. Something she had not noticed when they met before.

"Eli?" She made sure her jaw was not broken. "How did you find us?"

The Shin Bet operator Eli Weissach gave her a sidelong glance. "Tracker. Radiometric," he said simply, retrieving the small metal disc from the pocket of her jacket where he had hidden it. "I put it on you in the plaza in case I needed a backup computer code slinger. Turns out I do."

The Shin Bet unit zip-tied all the hostiles, even obvious corpses. One fellow was crawling along like an inchworm, hands bound behind his back near the big wooden chair by the wall. No one seemed to be minding him.

Lia's father saw him. Speaking in Latin, which was the language of their Christian Bedouin church, he said "*Ut peccata dimittantur...*"

May you be forgiven...

Mr. Suleiman grabbed the top of the solid wooden chair. It was carved in the shape of a bishop giving communion and must have weighed two hundred pounds. Bracing his foot on the wall of the cathedral, Mr. Suleiman toppled over the chair. It landed with a meat-crunching crash on the young villain's neck. He crawled no more.

“...in alium locum.”

...somewhere else.

Eli had brought a lot of troops with him as well as a medic.

Lia’s childhood friend Steph was dead. Just thinking what she had endured during her final minutes made her sick. She checked her parents. They were bruised and in quiet shock but otherwise unhurt.

“Spencer?” Lia went to the small pop-up medical tent. Portable robots monitored fluid flows into Spencer’s inert body.

The doctor spoke Hebrew. Lia figured it was bad news.

“I’m filling him with plasma as fast as I can,” the harried middle-aged medic said. “But if we don’t get him to the mobile surgery soon...”

“There is no mobile surgery,” Eli said flatly. “The insurgents destroyed it in their last try overrunning the Knesset parliament buildings.”

“Hadassah’s not far,” Lia said.

“Too far for him,” the medic said.

“Full cryo pod, then,” Lia said desperately. “You can order one in.”

“We ran out of those hours ago. Too many critically wounded.”

Spencer regained consciousness for a moment. He saw her.

“Lia... I’m sorry. If we hadn’t been with you, they would have robbed you and gone.” He could barely move his lips. “Tell Steph to... to keep fighting... she’s... can get through...”

Spencer passed out. One by one, the displays on the medical robots started flashing red. The medic threw his stethoscope on the ground.

Numb, Lia walked over to Eli. She noticed his soft shoes and lack of bulky body armor.

“Thank you. If you hadn’t saved us...”

He was as quick to shatter illusions as he was bones and lives.

“I wasn’t saving you; I need you to come with me. We’re going to save Israel.”

WESTERN WALL TUNNELS

DAVID

Having just broken out through the collapsing archaeology tunnel, David and his father found themselves staring down the barrels of two big-bore shotguns. They were leveled at them by Orthodox Jewish militiamen. As the dust settled, David also saw a pair of Israeli soldiers. They were subdued and trussed up on the floor of the tourist walkway.

David did not need delays. Streetsweepers or not, he would have yelled at them, but the militia looked enraged. Their comrades had died in the plaza and were fighting Grey Wolves hand to hand in the narrow streets above. Despite all that, they were not in control of the Temple Mount. They wanted to take it out on someone.

“I’m IDF, and this is—”

“I recognize him,” the lead militiaman said. “He’s the appeaser. We all saw your performance on the Wall. Reaching out to the hands that tried to knock down our HaKotel HaMa’aravi.”

His father said nothing.

“The Dome, it fell. Almost directly above us,” David said, spitting out bits of the Western Wall. He motioned to the helpless commandos bound by their own zip ties. “We should all get to safety.”

“Give up your weapons, and we’ll take you with us.”

The shotguns stayed leveled.

“Friend,” Rabbi Baumann said in a voice that was equal parts exhausted, mild, and firm, “unless we save Israel, debates about what kind of state we want will be nothing but words on the wind.”

“Meshugge blathering,” the second gunman barked.

David raised his hands and stood. “We don’t have weapons.”

“What’s that?”

His pocket had gotten turned inside out. The Orthodox girl’s ribbon was pinned to the lining. *Chazak ve’ematz*.

“Shimon’s people gave it to me.”

“Are you with them?” the militiaman asked, suspicious.

“Not exactly,” David said. “Shimon knew where I’ve been these last thirty-six hours: Tel Aviv, Hebron, Jericho. I was on the Mount when the Dome of the Rock fell. Shimon decided to help me; he had faith. Do the same. You won’t regret it.”

Milka had pinned the ribbon into his pocket without him feeling a thing. The little girl had a future as a brain surgeon. Or a pickpocket.

“How did you go into the Temple Mount?” the meaner of the two militiamen demanded. “The place is crawling with Grey Wolves jihadis.”

“I walked straight through the Golden Gate. Lucky, I guess.”

With that, the balances tipped in their favor. The militiamen decided not to kill them, and instead they gave David water and locations of the fiercest battles.

“There’s no way out through the Cistern exit. We sealed it.”

The tourist tunnel led north along the Western Wall straight into the middle of the Muslim Quarter. Were they trapped again?

“Just ahead there is a Religious Ministry tunnel,” his father said. “That is, if we may pass in peace.”

Despite braces of hand grenades slung over their shoulders, the young Hasidic men looked a bit ashamed.

“Sorry about earlier,” a militiaman said as he cut their prisoners free. “We should help each other.”

They parted ways with the Orthodox fighters and took along the two scruffy-looking soldiers. Having them along would limit the conversation David could have with the rabbi. He led them over to an inconspicuous doorway. A swipe of an unmarked fob on a chain around his neck brought up an optical scanner. He performed the two-handed Cohanim blessing sign of the High Priests of Aaron. The latch clicked open.

Impressed, David said, “There’s more to the Religious Ministry than most people realize.”

Checking to see the militia were out of earshot, one of the Shin Bet pair grumbled, “We could have taken those putzes. They got lucky.”

“Who cares?” David rounded on them, pointing to his father. “This is a cabinet minister. We’re at war. Do your jobs, or after you get out of stockade, you’ll be freezing your asses off in Golan Heights every winter until retirement.”

The small room behind the elaborately locked door looked to be the most boring administrative office in the country. Ledgers dating back to the eighteenth century stood on shelves around a single wooden desk. The four of them were nearly touching shoulders. As soon as the outer door latched shut, a click came from inside one of the bookcases.

Rabbi Baumann swung it aside and ushered them through.

“Dad, this isn’t on the tourist maps.”

As they walked, motion sensors triggered lights a few meters ahead of them.

“Parts of this tunnel date back to when the Romans tried to erase Judea and Jews from history.” The rabbi held up his hand to stop them from barging forward and listened. There were only echoes of vibrations from the fighting above, which carried down from the buildings overhead.

“Hadrian tore Jerusalem up by the roots, rebranded the land ‘Syria

Palaestinia,’ and renamed Jerusalem ‘Aelina Capitolinia.’”

If David’s sense of direction was correct, they were heading at right angles to the Western Wall, farther west.

“This leads up to a water main junction.”

“Don’t tell me the rabbis are taking over utilities too,” David joked.

“Engineering I leave to your brother, Boaz. However, the modern system of pipes in this part of Old Jerusalem was found to be parallel to the two-thousand-year-old aqueducts. They connected to the Ein Eitam Spring and Solomon’s Pools. Some halakhic advice was needed.”

“Of course,” David said. “Zav mikveh purifying baths need to be fed by living water in contact with its source.”

“Very good, David. Aren’t you glad I locked your comic books away during the school year so you could focus on the Torah?” The next door did not cooperate. “What? How’s this not working?”

Neither the rabbi’s fob nor the soldiers’ key cards would open the very solid-looking door. Breaking through was not an option; they could not risk making noise.

Without hesitation, the rabbi pointed down a circular stairwell. “The long way, then.”

They moved on. David glanced back. Because of the electronic lock that did not work, they had only one way to go. Having options taken away seemingly at random put him on edge.

“Does this lead outside the walls of the Old City?”

“Not quite. It’s an artifact from centuries of cooperation with Jerusalem’s Christians.” The rabbi scratched his beard, and a puff of orange sand came out. “If you think we’ve got a complicated religion, wait till you hear Armenian Apostolic priests debate with Greek Orthodox bishops.”

David sensed his father wanted to say more, but the presence of the two Internal Security officers prevented him.

“What unit are you from?”

“Yamas,” the sullen one called Ben said. His buddy was called Lod.

While Ben and Lod struggled to project a badass attitude, they were not top-level Shin Bet operators. Yamas was part of the Border Police. They were best at mixing in with groups of rock throwers and, on a signal, suddenly turning on the Palestinians and arresting the rioters. Mass urban warfare where every encounter was fatal was not their main gig.

“We were called in as extra security when the Grey Wolves attacked the Lion’s Gate,” Lod added. David surmised he was the more talkative but possibly the sneakier of the two. “After that, we regrouped in the Wall plaza and helped with the security cordon for the cease-fire talk.”

The passage was narrow. In some places they had to squeeze through sideways.

“Hold here.” David noticed the floor angled up. “Lod, you go ahead.”

The border guardsman squeezed to the front. After some scraping noises and grunting from around a stony corner, he called back: “Clear. But there is a big iron hatch. It’s stuck.”

It was a style which one would find on ships, set directly in the stone ceiling. The mechanism was rusted and in terrible repair.

“See what I mean?” the rabbi said. “There are eighteen Christian denominations responsible for the church above us, and not one of them has an oil can.”

It took David and both soldiers to move the lever-style hand crank.

“The local rabbinate used to maintain it but got fed up.”

“When?”

“About two hundred years ago.”

The door only opened a third of the way. Lod, the skinniest, went first.

“It’s a damn tomb,” he hissed back.

“Have some respect. It belongs to a famous Jew,” the rabbi said. “Joseph of Arimathea. The man who took Jesus down from the cross.”

More dust streamed down David’s face as he crawled out of the tiny

cavern. Two flickering candle tapers were the only light. He pulled his father up. The stout man had to struggle and nearly lost his pants, but he made it. Somewhere in the building, hymns were being sung in Latin.

“Welcome to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre,” his father said as he brushed crud off his black suit. “I better go first. The Syrian and Armenian Christians all know me. The next room is where they hold Mass.”

“Lousy security, they have,” Ben said as he barged forward. “Anyone can walk right—”

“Halt!” David snapped and grabbed the Yamas guy. If he had not seen that crap all over the place at Jericho, he would have thought it was a strand of spider’s silk.

“Not as lousy as you think.” David crouched down and blew gently on the diamond nanothread. It was set as a tripwire attached to a gas canister munition.

“Look here,” said a familiar voice from the doorway. “What a place to find a guy we thought was dead for sure.”

David peered around the corner, dumbstruck. “Atticus?”

The American lowered his pistol. Behind him was a pale patch of albino forehead and a pair of glowing blue eyes. Sarge Bryan held a huge chrome rifle. A thin-wristed hand pushed the weapon down.

“Not in here, Sarge. Are you crazy?” Mr. Perdix admonished.

Further back, a shock of long black hair flicked behind them.

“What’s going on? Is it something I can film?” Ms. Sato’s head bobbed up behind a handheld camera. “Oh! Is that Major Baumann coming out of the crypt?”

The rabbi turned to David, raising his eyebrows. “Friends of yours?”

**CHURCH OF THE HOLY SEPULCHRE
CHRISTIAN QUARTER
OLD CITY**

DAVID

“Oh, my word!” Ms. Sato frantically waved over the broad shoulders of Atticus and Sarge Bryan. “Of all the people you wouldn’t expect to see crawling out of a tomb. Hi, Major Baumann!”

David introduced the rabbi and their two new friends from Yamas. He did not expect a warm greeting from Miss Aleph, and he didn’t get one. The AI hung on Ms. Sato’s belt, sulking silently.

“How did you get here?” David asked the American soldier. “More importantly, how are you walking? Last time I saw your leg it looked like it had been run over by a freight train.”

“Thanks to you, we got primo treatment at Mount Scopus,” Captain Atticus said. He was balancing on a very high-tech-looking walking cast of a sort David had never seen before. It had chrome and carbon-fiber parts.

They walked out from the area of the tombs. Ahead was a larger atrium of the church, which held an ornate shrine. A hushed crowd of scared-looking civilians huddled there.

“They even let us ride into Jerusalem in a ZAKA ambulance,” Sarge Bryan said.

“We came with a crazy guy named Schlomo and a Korean who I don’t think was really a medic,” Corporal Nobu said.

“Ms. Sato, you’ve come back,” David said, a little disheartened. “I thought you’d hunker down at the US embassy or get the first flight out.”

“Little problem with Plan A,” Ellie said. “There is no more US Embassy.”

“We ended up in an annex of the British Embassy near Hadassah,” Atticus said. “I don’t think it’s a coincidence we’ve all ended up here together.”

David shot a sharp look at the refurbished casing of his AI.

“Miss Aleph, would you know anything about those doorways in the Wall tunnels that just happened to be locked, leaving us only one way to go?”

She continued her silent treatment.

“How did you get here?”

“There was a cease-fire that was supposed to be negotiated,” Ellie offered by way of explanation. “Captain Atticus volunteered to check on this site and the people taking refuge here.”

Atticus shrugged. “The President’s got a big fundamentalist Christian constituency. We were the closest unit who’d had direct contact with the enemy, so I volunteered us.”

“I didn’t quite catch that,” Nobu asked cheekily. “Did the captain just say ‘double danger pay’?”

David looked at the reporter. She had changed into kaki fatigues but still looked like a tourist, a hot Eurasian one at that.

She looked up and around. “This place is really confusing. I know it’s quite holy, but the Vatican seemed much more organized. I went there one Easter to report on the pope’s new robes; we each had our own table valet in cute little Jodhpur pants.”

“I’m sorry our war is not living up to your expectations,” David said dryly. He could tell the British woman was chattering out of nervousness, but his pains and fatigue were making him irritable. He had really hoped she, out of all of them, would have found a way out of the conflict zone.

“Ellie could have stayed at the consulate,” Bryan said, seemingly reading his mind. “In fact, her boss asked her to.”

“More like begged,” Ms. Sato said. “He finally threatened me and said if I got killed he would publish a really awful obituary picture of me. I told him I wouldn’t care because no one reads the *Juggernaut* anyway, and hung up.”

She led the way around the Sepulchre atrium. “It’s so unbelievable we’re all back together again,” she chirped. “Rabbi Baumann, Your Holiness, is it okay to say ‘karma’ in here?”

Before his bemused father could reply to being called “holiness,” a stream of sharp curses came from the other side of the Sepulchre rotunda. A group of men were angry at each other, in more than one language. A baby started crying among the crowd of tourists. David followed the group of armed Americans around until they found a tall black man wearing a cassock who had a chubby priest by the collar.

“I told you before,” Sarge Bryan said, forcibly separating the battling Christians. “Knock it off.”

The albino put down his extraordinary silver rifle and climbed up on a scaffolding to speak to the crowd. Well over a thousand people were jammed together.

“I don’t know if you all can understand me...”

Rabbi Baumann stepped forward and said in perfect Greek and then in Arabic: “Attention! For your safety, listen to this man.”

“Thanks, padre.” Sarge nodded and addressed the crowd. “There’s plenty of people outside this church who’d gladly do us harm. Let’s not help ’em, huh?”

The rabbi translated. The Greek and the Ethiopian clerics declared a truce.

“We’re going to have a look outside,” Sarge concluded. The sight of his eyes shining out from his white face seemed to stun the church’s occupants into silence. “You holy men over there. See to it everyone has water and medical care if they need it.”

Standing above the ornate rotunda, level with the Sepulchre itself, Sarge Bryan looked like an apparition from the Old Testament. The priests stood as stock-still as the statues around them and just stared up at Bryan.

“Move!” he belted out, drill-master style.

“*Kínísou grígora!*” the rabbi echoed. “*Taharuk bsre!*”

The clerics got busy among the crowd.

David examined Atticus’s leg apparatus; hydraulics and artificial muscles were bypassing the injured area.

“You wouldn’t happen to have a spare, would you?” David’s own leg was tightening up in spasms.

“I’ve got some tensor medicated bandages,” Nobu said, looking at David’s burned and scraped calf.

The fast trip down the Western Wall had not improved it, but he felt the need to joke as he gingerly pulled some burned cloth fibers out of coagulating scabs covering his shin. “The upside is, it looks like I’ll never have to wax hair off this leg again.”

“Let’s go up top,” Atticus said, hobbling in the direction of a dusty stone staircase.

The roof was dominated by two pale-blue domes which were made visible by one small floodlight aimed at the golden crucifix and the flames from fires raging in the city.

“Man, those peace talks went hella sideways, huh?” Sarge said, scanning the street.

“We heard a ferocious battle on the Templar Mount,” Ellie said. “We saw some footage as we were coming in.”

“My father and the rabbinate tried to make peace—the first attempts did not go well,” David said. “We’ll put things back together.”

“Good luck putting the Dome of the Rock back together,” Mr. Perdix said snidely.

David’s retort was interrupted by the sight of two figures running up the

street toward the church. They were both on fire.

“Oh,” Ellie said, looking away. She sounded resigned rather than horrified.

After struggling on a few more steps, the figures stumbled, fell in a heap, and burned. A mass of people followed. Some held torches, others slings, rocks, and guns. They came on, their booted feet crushing the smoking corpses into squishy embers.

“Incoming!” Atticus said, motioning to Bryan. “They do not look like they are here for Midnight Mass.”

Sarge raised his gleaming rifle; it hummed. Mr. Perdix hovered to one side.

“What is that?” David asked.

“After we saw what the insurgents had deployed,” the DARPA scientist said, “I got authorization to field test an equalizer. This is a soliton gauss rifle.”

Miss Aleph spoke from Ms. Sato’s pocket.

“Inadequate terminology, but it describes the basic principles.”

“Hi, Aleph.”

“Ellie, please tell Dave I’m not talking to him, ever. He left me at Hadassah.”

“You were out of batteries.”

“I could have helped you.”

David fibbed to make the AI feel better. “No. They searched me thoroughly before I went through Golden Gate. You would have given me away.”

“It’s warmed up, I think,” Sarge said, holding the rifle and sighting in on the hundreds of oncoming rioters. “What now?”

“Shoot. Kill,” Mr. Perdix said, looking eager to see his deadly toy get some real-world action. “The projectile travels at over five miles per second. While not as powerful as their Voitenko thermal detonators, the gauss rifle has sustained standoff capacity to eight hundred meters.”

Sarge looked at his commander for the final word.

“There’s some hard-core guys among the crowd,” Bryan said, his glowing eyes zooming in and scanning the street. “But most of them are just kids,

boys and girls with rocks and slings.”

“Sarge, those errant youth just set two people on fire and stomped on their charred bones,” Mr. Perdix said. “If you don’t do something, this church and everyone in it will get the same treatment.”

Atticus put his hand on the chrome barrel of the exotic weapon. “There’s got to be other settings.”

“Air burst.”

“Won’t work,” Mr. Perdix said quickly.

“Air burst.”

“Too dangerous.”

“Do that,” Atticus ordered.

Mr. Perdix fiddled on the side of the weapon. “Okay. But this is going to overcharge the capacitor... there. Don’t complain to me if it blows us all up.”

Sarge fired. The hyper-velocity projectile blew up right over the crowd. The shockwaves sent half the mob reeling to the paving stones.

“Again?” Sarge asked.

Atticus nodded. They fired until the hostiles dispersed.

“Normally,” Mr. Perdix said, a bit disappointed, “you would have seen a dramatic kill radius of thirty meters, caused by a combination of diethylzinc pyroclastics and kinetic rupture.”

“We’ll keep that in mind for the real bad guys,” Atticus said. “Let’s move —”

His words were cut off as two square blocks and almost all of the downed rioters were vaporized in a thermal detonation. Like at Ben Gurion Airport, David felt instant heat. Like at Hebron, he felt the split-second delay before bits of granulated cinders peppered his clothes and face. The epicenter was far enough away that they were able to duck under the stone eaves of the roof just as the full blast wave hit.

“One of them must have had a detonator device,” David yelled over the hot wind rushing over them.

“That would have taken out the whole Sepulchre building and everyone

inside,” Mr. Perdix said. “So much for half measures.”

David knew the dispersion-swarm tactics of the enemy. “Captain, that blast will attract Grey Wolves units. This place cannot be held.”

“Nobu,” Atticus ordered. “Take the rabbi, get his key card and door codes. Tell the civilians below to evacuate through the tomb tunnels. We’re moving out.”

Down the street, buildings and cars had formed a flaming pyramid. Orange at the base, it swirled into blackness to merge with the dark sky of fallen night.

David rested on the back of a parapet that might have been there before the Crusades. He was light-headed. Even his good leg felt like it was attached to the roof like a bar of lead. He heaved himself down the stairs into the Sepulchre rotunda. As they organized the evacuation, he found a young Catholic cleric who spoke English.

“You understand how to seal the latch?” David asked, crouching down in the first-century tomb.

“Won’t they come after us?” Friar Bartimej was from Iceland; his wide blue eyes looked down into the depths of the tunnel. A pilgrim with a baby was descending into the gloom.

“The top of the hatch is a perfect match to the stone here. You’ll be safe,” David said, his hand brushing against his pocket. “Here, take this. At the other end, you’ll meet some Jewish militia. Give it to them; tell them you are guests in the house of David.”

He handed Bartimej the embroidered ribbon. It was soiled, but the Hebrew letters were clear.

David waited until everyone was out. He heard the rusted lever lock squeal shut on the other side, then he crept out of the crypt for the second time. Outside the church, sounds of battle boomed in the distance. Rotors of fully stealthed helos churned above. David ran to meet the others. He felt the very air between the worn stone walls was charged with hate refueled and

reignited. His father and his friends waited for him.

In a low, arched tunnel leading out from the church compound, small lights flickered on and off as the jury-rigged electrical grid tried to compensate for lines being cut by fires and explosions. He passed Ms. Sato, who was crouched down by a drainpipe.

She spoke into Miss Aleph. “In the middle of embattled Jerusalem, the British-American-Israeli team I’m with has managed to get some five hundred—”

David signaled up with his thumb. No sense being modest.

“—make that two thousand Christian pilgrims out from Christendom’s holiest church site to safety. For security reasons, we cannot divulge any details, but it is a small spot of bright news in the middle of one of the darkest times in the city’s modern history. Ellie Sato, at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem.”

“Are you getting a broadcast signal?”

She shook her head. “I’m going to try uploading to an undersea cable at our next stop.”

She stashed Miss Aleph in one of the dozen pockets of her military jacket as Ms. Sato and David caught up to the rest of the group.

“The real breakthrough was the recharging system.” Mr. Perdix was still fan-boying over the gauss rifle.

“I’m the only one here who understands what you’re talking about, and I’m not impressed.”

David said, “I should probably take her.”

“Please, David,” Ms. Sato said.

Miss Aleph raised her voice so the others could hear.

“It was really nice working with you and Captain Atticus. If the United States develops an AI Corps, please forward me a transfer application.”

“Sure thing,” the American said, shrugging.

David took the sulking mechanical brain. He scanned the rooftops, the sealed iron doors, and the nooks around the courtyard.

“We can’t stay here.”

“We were just waiting for you, son,” the rabbi said, picking up Ms. Sato’s pack. “Our Captain Atticus has agreed to escort us to the Knesset parliament compound.”

David did not like it. It would mean moving three kilometers through urban streets. One enemy on a rooftop could pin them down and signal Grey Wolves or rioters to cut them off.

“Right, Minister,” he said. David’s nightmare scenario was a mob getting close enough to vaporize them all with no chance of escape. “Sarge Bryan needs to take the lead with the gauss gun. I recommend rules of engagement be weapons-free. We can’t take any chances.”

They moved down darkened streets. A few days earlier, these avenues had been thronged with tourists, pilgrims, and local shoppers. Tonight every window and doorway was covered by shutters of metal or Kevlar. All kinds of debris lay on the smooth paving stones—there were scarves; necklaces; a pita bread soaking in a puddle of motor oil; there was a tube of sun lotion, its contents oozing out; and there was a single running shoe with an enormous cockroach climbing into it.

Water from a burst fire hydrant trickled along one side of the shops. David smelled burnt hummus with garlic mixed with cordite and sulfur. He might never eat local food again.

Shock waves from a distant explosion rattled the alleyway. Its source was several hundred meters away. The last few remaining pieces of shattered glass clinging to a broken window rained down and crunched underfoot. The broken rhythm of his own steps struck David as almost comical as he found himself limping in unison with Atticus.

“I don’t see why you kept your old leg,” David said, quietly ribbing Atticus. “Your military industrial complex is clearly bent on switching over to an all-robot army.”

“Don’t be recruiting Sarge into the IDF, please,” Atticus said, nodding to Bryan, who had cleared the next intersection about fifty meters ahead. “You

guys have enough ethnic factions here. You don't want to add albinos to the mix."

They came to a narrow cross street.

"Looks like a good omen, if you hold with that kind of nonsense." Mr. Perdix pointed to a sign.

They turned onto David Street.

"Only Corporal Singh is that superstitious," Nobu said.

"I had to leave him with the Orthodox militia."

"Maybe they're converting him and Marwood," Ellie said. "His pet's already had his tail circumcised."

"Why, Ms. Sato," David said, "being a war correspondent has made you quite racy."

They stopped at the entrance to the big roundabout near the citadel. A small cat dashed across the wet cobbles; it flattened its ears and squeezed its head into a hole that appeared too small to fit a mouse. Its tail flicked and disappeared.

"Careful here," David said. "There's a tall tower coming up. When the Jordanians held the city from 1948 until 1967, they had a sniper up there every day."

"And two on Shabbat," the rabbi added.

A fire burning beyond the walls showed only rubble where the citadel of Jerusalem once stood.

"There are some shooters up there," Sarge Bryan said calmly as he studied the scene with his built-in optics. "They look to be IDF, unless the Grey Wolves decided to start wearing those silly camouflage shower caps."

Mitznefet helmet covers, David thought hopefully. It had to be friendlies.

"Stay back. Miss Aleph has this."

"I do?"

David grabbed a Nitecore flashlight from Ben and attached a cable to the reluctant Miss Aleph. He beamed a laser holograph of the sword and wings of Unit 101, along with the day's open code: "*Im harosh bakeer.*"

“The code of the day is ‘his head in a wall,’” David said. “Basically meaning a stubborn person.”

“You IDF guys look like you’re in charge here,” Atticus said, relaxing.

Against his better judgment, so did David. Of course they were going to win. For a half century, Israel ranked among the top ten military powers in the world. They had universal conscription that included women. They had faced down enemies with three times their number of tanks, ships, and planes. The Grey Wolves had none of those things. They would send him and his rabble to Hades in no time.

After communicating with the sentries, they made it to the IDF-controlled Jaffa Gate. The insurgents had set off thermal bombs, but the Israelis had countered with cluster munitions. It seemed the defenders had the resolve to destroy the city in order to save it. Atticus and the others went ahead. As soon as they were around the corner, David pulled the rabbi back.

“A moment,” he whispered to his father.

They huddled by a tourist shop behind a carousel stand of handbags. Their leather was scorched black.

“I’ve got to tell you,” David whispered, “Boaz and I went to the strategic defence depot in the Negev. He has two *nukes*.”

“That is worrying.” The rabbi thought a moment. “We only authorized him to have one.”

91

ARMENIAN QUARTER OLD CITY

LIA

Eli Weissach's Shin Bet guards hustled Lia's parents out of the blood-spattered alcove.

Her friends' bodies were back there, Spencer and Stephanie. Beaten, mutilated, and killed by the sadistic vermin who lay dead beside them. A man groaned. It was the Armenian monk; he was lying at the bottom of the steps into the cathedral. Delirious from a concussion, he tried to push the medics off him.

Lia's steps faltered. Images flashed in front of her: Faisal's buck-toothed mouth eating a bullet, Eitan's arm in a cooler, Khóshekh's yellow eyes staring at her as she left their apartment in Tel Aviv.

"Let's go," Eli snapped at her as her parents disappeared around the corner. "War waits for no one."

Though he had just saved her and her parents, Lia was instantly not fond of Eli at all.

I wasn't saving you. We're going to save Israel.

She was about to ask him what the heck he meant when the sturdily built commando held up his hand to his ear.

He pressed on his earpiece and talked to one of his units. "Say again?" He

paused, listening. “I’ve heard enough. I told you, anyone, friend, foe, or fucking Abraham comes within four hundred meters of you, you shoot to kill, no warning. Got it? Out.”

They moved down the steps, away from Saint James Cathedral and toward the Zion Gate. If serving in the IDF had taught Lia anything, it was to get to the point.

“Where are we going?” Lia asked, getting a blanket for her parents from a medic’s backpack.

“Your parents are going to Hadassah. I can spare one man with a car,” Eli said. “You’re lucky. My computer programmer was killed by a mortar at the Temple Mount. That’s why I came. You have the next-best available skill set for my mission. You’ll be told what is needed when required. That’s an order.”

He was forceful and audaciously self-confident, much like her husband David, but without a trace of gentle good humor. It would have been easy for Lia to just wilt and comply with Eli’s demands.

However, recalling what had just happened, she realized the self-serving nature of the demons of hate and fury that were loose tonight. She reconsidered. The time for wilting was over. Having come face-to-face with inhuman wickedness, Lia found it was now easier to assert herself.

“Nice speech, Eli,” Lia said, straightening her posture and pulled her arm out from his grip. “The problem is, you cannot give me orders. I’m IDF; you’re Shin Bet.”

“Don’t give me that crap. I am acting on the prime minister’s directive. The acting minister of defense, your brother-in-law, has signed off as well.” Eli looked angrier with her than he had while executing the survivors of Faisal’s gang. “One radio call to your superior—”

Dumb bluff.

“Go ahead,” Lia said sharply. “You have enough trouble getting through to your own people a few hundred meters away,” Lia said. “Keep trying to boss

me around, and you can handcuff me now, court martial me later. I have to tell you, with my hands tied, it will be hard for me to complete the coding you want done.”

Eli looked at her like he was going to stab her. Instead he said, “What do you want? Make it quick.”

“My parents are getting out of here. All the way out,” Lia said, thinking fast. There would be no second round of demands. “Maybe I’m being overly cautious, but I’m thinking this is not a safe place.” Speaking Hebrew, she was able to load her words with a lot of aggressive sarcasm. “I want them on a boat to Greece or Italy.”

“What makes you think—”

“Your shoes and your flotation body armor,” she said, cutting off his condescending question. “The Navy asked me for input when they designed those shoes to make sure they posed the lowest possible static risk for close-contact environments where quantum computers might be located. I’d say we’re going on a trip in a submarine.”

Now Eli looked more like he wanted to stab himself.

“Greece,” he hissed between thin lips. “There’s a stealth missile corvette leaving with VIPs, politicians, industrialists, and their families. Your parents will be on board; I’ll make sure of that.”

“So will I.”

Lia caught up to her parents. Her father walked back down the steps along the terraced buildings, stunned.

“Our beautiful city, it’s ruined,” he said weakly. The Shin Bet guards ushered them through the Zion Gate and up toward HaShalom Street. “My father was with the Haganah. Give me a rifle. All men of conscience have to do something.”

All men of conscience have gone, Lia thought. The stones outside the gate were pitted with fresh bullet marks over the hundreds of older ones dug by previous wars. Lia offered a silent apology to her friends for not doing more,

then she turned away from the Old City.

Mrs. Suleiman took her husband's arm as they crossed over a concrete traffic divider. "Let's just do what Lia says." She sounded exhausted but determined. "You're always saying she's so smart."

The outskirts of Jerusalem were on fire. Now that night had inked out the sky, the urban fires looked like brands at the end of near-invisible columns of smoke. Silwan, Abu Tor, the area of Gethsemane, and the Garden of Olives, all were aflame.

Waiting outside the gate was the armored column from the plaza, or what was left of it. The mega-tank was banged up but had made it. The bio-nuke land leviathan dwarfed all the other armored war machines, making them look like toys. One of its front outer treads was melted away, but the inner ones were functional. Nearby, black-clad security teams cleared a landing zone.

Lia looked for the rest of the troops; Eli only had a platoon of thirty with him. There was no way they were holding Zion Gate. Just as soon as she thought that, they attracted enemy attention.

Even Eli flinched when an Israeli heavy machine gun opened up with its four barrels at something only the operator could see.

"We'll fix these savages soon," Eli said, his fingers drumming on the handguard of his Tavor rifle.

"Fix them?" Lia said in a near whisper. "We brought this on ourselves."

The blond killer was offended. "What do you mean? Look at this place. It could literally be Eden if it weren't for the..."

"Arabs. You can say it."

"I was thinking scum."

Lia instantly wanted to kill the guy who had saved her life, just for being such a racist dick.

"Are you out of your mind? Eden? You look around, smell the sulfur and the cordite. This isn't Eden; it's Armageddon," Lia said. "There's only so

much people, even Arabush scum, can take.”

Eli was too filled with hate to listen.

“Those morons think they can run their own country? Palestinians can’t run a fruit stand,” Eli said with iron-willed contempt. “Move over there.”

The machine gun on the big tank fell silent. Some soldiers pulled a tarp away from a structure Lia had thought was a temporary field command center. Under the camouflage cloth was a strange machine. It looked like a dragonfly with its wings folded back.

“Are we going in that?”

“Quickest way to the coast. You want your parents to be on the corvette to Greece, don’t you?”

“It flies?”

“So they tell me. The Air Force doesn’t have a name for it yet.”

Before Lia could decide if they were making the right choice, dozens of fat hornets started buzzing overhead. She recognized the sound.

“EXACTO rounds incoming!” she yelled. The noise they made was exactly like she had experienced during the 3-D combat training simulations.

“Turn the optics down,” Eli yelled to his people. “Countermeasures on.”

Their screech-buzz sound was a dead giveaway. These incoming fifty-caliber rounds were homing in on the Shin Bet soldiers’ own infrared night vision and radio signals. They were the plug and play of death. Snipers no longer had to train for years; they could just rapid fire in the general direction of the enemy and let the little fins on the bullets aim them as they flew. Several fat bullets hit the other side of the big tank.

“It’s coming from north, northwest,” Lia said, making sure her parents kept their heads down. Big rounds like that could shred a human body. Even shrapnel from a near miss could perforate vital organs.

A bullet hit the flying machine. It was nearly spent and bounced off, but Eli still went mental.

“Suppressing fire! Everything you’ve got!” He emptied his rifle in the

general direction of the enemy.

His troops did not need encouragement. Every APC turret and machine gun lit up. A torrent of tracers launched into the night. Lia and her parents covered their ears. She pulled Eli's arm and motioned to the flyer.

"You said let's go!" she yelled, her words lost instantly in the racket.

Eli shook her off and delayed them some more by ducking into the bio-nuke tank. He retrieved a hard case about the size of a carry-on bag. Coming out from the ramp, he yelled orders at the war machine's AI.

Crouching down, the four of them ran to the aircraft. The cramped seating was more like the interior of an electric car strapped to two airliner engines.

Two pilots sat in front. Eli tapped one of them on the shoulder and got a thumbs-up in reply. The craft had not suffered any serious damage. People who would have it otherwise had been creeping around the Israeli positions. Lia caught sight of enemy chemlights and muzzle flashes. The monomaniac Eli had put all his firepower north without adequate rear cover.

"Flank, flank, flank!" She pointed him in the direction of danger. "Eli, you're being flanked."

Small rounds hit the laminate window glass in front of their pilot's head. It was too late to get out. The Shin Bet position was going to be overrun. Lia could see hundreds of Grey Wolves and insurgent fighters working their way forward.

"Up," Eli ordered the pilots as a potato-masher-style homemade RPG sailed past their window. "Now!"

This was the latest in vertical takeoff craft tech; its wings unfolded with a snap. They rose with an elevator-like jerk upward that made her worry about her parents' backs and necks.

The dragonfly wings were dispersed exhaust panels designed to lift them up. At about one hundred feet altitude, these folded back, and jet engines came on with enormous thrust.

"Go around," Eli said into his onboard comm system.

That was not the best idea. Not with the air thick with heat-seeking fifty-caliber bullets. Lia did not have a microphone to the cockpit. They would not have listened to her anyway. Eli wanted to ensure his doomed platoon was taking as many of the enemy with them as they could.

It was too late for the Israeli Air Force or anyone to save the day. Most of Eli's soldiers were down. On the other side of a low Silwan hill, one of the thermobaric devices went off. Even at a distance of five hundred meters, the shock wave sent a shudder of air turbulence through their small craft. After a breathless moment of near weightlessness, it righted itself and sped toward the coast.

Lia glanced sideways at Eli Weissach. Why couldn't he have come sooner? Steph... Spencer... Steph! She wanted to scream and tear at something. She forced herself not to lose it. Eli had gotten there as fast as he could have. If he'd been a few minutes later, they'd all have been killed by those thugs.

There was another reason she had to appear calm. Eli had only come for her because he wanted something. If the Shin Bet leader thought he was not getting his end of the bargain, he would cancel the deal and drop them off in the middle of the war to fend for themselves.

The last glimpse Lia caught of Jerusalem was of the bio-nuke tank raging over the terrain. Under the control of its onboard AI, it was a self-driving death machine. In kamikaze mode, it would spew fire until its bullet magazines and napalm reservoirs were empty. Then it would thunder into the insurgent lines, a wounded rhino crushing pygmies. Its composite steel treads would grind bodies into dust until some fatal shot finally brought it down.

**JAFFA GATE
OLD CITY**

DAVID

Before David could say anything to his father, soldiers came running from the Jaffa citadel past Atticus and Sarge Bryan.

“We’re sorry, sirs,” a bespectacled IDF reservist said. “We didn’t know it was a government official approaching. We wouldn’t have let the air strike happen, sirs.”

David noticed their patches. It was the wimpiest symbol in the IDF, a green olive tree.

“Golani brigade? You have tanks now?”

“Sirs, we’re loose elements from various divisions centered on the 7th Brigade and 36th Armor Division under General Behar, sirs.”

They quickly stepped to the line of tanks.

“How’s the north? Syria and Lebanon?” the rabbi asked.

“Quiet enough they could send us here,” the soldier replied. “May we speak freely...”

“Do Golani do anything else?” David quipped.

“From what I saw and heard, Syrian regular, Iranian Revolutionary Guard, and Hezbollah are all waiting to see how things go.”

“Vultures.”

“So far they’ve massed some armor but are keeping way behind their SAM umbrella.” The soldier looked frustrated. “When we were told to come south, it... it looked like every rocket and missile in the Middle East was pointed at Haifa, my hometown.”

David could tell that, but for his orders, the man would have hopped into an attack helicopter and gone up and blasted the northern threat back into whatever came before the Stone Age.

“After we finish with these Grey Wolves, we owe them all a good kick in the balls.” David, too, was keen on payback on a regional scale.

The rabbi seemed distracted. Parliament, the prime minister, and clarity were only about a kilometer away, David thought.

“Soldier, can you get us to the Knesset?”

They were offered a variety of options. He and the Americans ruled out anything that could draw enemy attention or fire; armored personnel carriers were bullet magnets and too slow.

Outside Jaffa Gate sat a highway underpass. Burned, abandoned, and squashed cars littered the asphalt. A few looked drivable.

“We’ll take those civilian cars, a foot escort, and your two best tanks lagging behind us three hundred meters,” David ordered.

“Wait a second,” Lom said. “Shin Bet is in charge of cabinet security.”

David had nearly forgotten the pair they had rescued from the Jewish militia in the Western Wall tunnels.

“And look what a great job the Shin Bet is doing.” Turning to the Golani officer, David said, “You held this gate, but if we cannot get the government working to deal with this crisis, your sacrifices will have been for nothing. Rabbi Baumann has to get to the Knesset.”

David looked at the burning city. Before sunset, he would have staked everything on the assumption that his father and the prime minister were wise and far thinking enough to get Israel out of this mess. But now?

The division commander came out of his command center. He looked

downcast.

“General Behar,” the rabbi said. “We meet again.”

David saluted and introduced his group.

General Behar’s short gray hair was caked with blood on one side. He looked like Moshe’s psycho brother, who the Dyan family had kept locked up in the cellar. There were welding burns on his forearms. Senior officers were repairing damaged tanks? Things were stretched more thinly than David would ever have imagined.

“Americans?” Behar’s bloodshot eyes looked over their group, which included Atticus, Sarge Bryan, Mr. Perdix, and Corporal Nobu.

“And a Brit,” David said. “A high-ranking intelligence officer.”

Ms. Sato looked as though she was going to salute, then settled for doing something that looked like a cross between a bow and a curtsy.

Behar looked at David. “Major Baumann, you were in Jericho?”

“I was.”

“Did you happen to meet a Major Seinwicz?”

There was no point in being delicate.

“I did. He’s dead. His body... I saw it myself.”

Behar nodded.

“I’ll tell my daughter she’s a widow. If she’s still alive in Beit Kama.” The general turned to his father. “Rabbi Baumann, if we ever find out this”—he waved his fist at the smoking battleground Jerusalem had become—“was caused by the games you politicians like to play, you’ll find Merkava tanks knocking on the doors of parliament.”

The general put David in charge of the convoy. They drove away from the Old City. Dark office buildings and burning cars slid past the tinted windows of his commandeered SUV.

Sarge Bryan was in the lead car with his incredible rifle and more incredible eyes. They had commandeered large GMC Yukons and buttressed the sunroofs with SAPI body armor plates to form a bullet-resistant turret.

The albino soldier was prepared to return sniper fire or suppress and scatter an ambush at a moment's notice.

"Make sure those tanks keep their distance," David said. "Judging from their known swarming tactics, Grey Wolves units will attack them first."

Red Dawn defenses were everywhere. At intervals of approximately one hundred meters, a steel pole capable of stopping an eighteen-wheeler had sprung out of the pavement. Some resilient shopkeepers eyed them warily from behind countertops. More than a few of them had night-vision-enabled rifles.

"Why are we going to the Triangle?" David asked Miss Aleph.

"I've programmed the lead car with the best route," she said curtly.

"Why is that the best route?"

"Because it is."

They veered left and then right around some dragon's teeth made to rip the guts out of any tank or armor that tried to barge through.

"Okay, okay. I'm sorry I left you at the hospital."

"It gave me time to consider my career options. Ellie Sato has an interesting line of work. The combination of front-line war reporting and cutting-edge fashion design is inherently appealing to my algorithms."

"Thank you for not getting her killed during that stunt you pulled on the road from Jericho."

"And. . ."

David gritted his teeth. The silica-brained assistant was acting really autonomously. Was she hiding anything? Was she capable of having secrets?

"And thank you very much for saving our asses with that same farcical stunt," David said to Miss Aleph. "Combined with Ms. Sato's acting ability, it went about as well as it could have."

"You're welcome."

"What happened to Lia?"

"That's the first thing I checked. Her well-being is very important to me."

The IDF sources Miss Aleph was able to access reported that Lia was with the prime minister's aide Eli Weissach. No other information was available.

That was not good enough, but David could not just go off mission and leave his father. He had to get to the bottom of Boaz's nuclear theft. The suitcase bomb could be anywhere, but there were only so many places to hide the 2,000-pound Spider device.

“Anything else?”

“Lebanese militias and Syrian forces are taking a wait-and-see approach to destroying Israel.

“Jordan is not a factor. The government has ceased to function. Factional fighting and looting are reported everywhere.

“Egypt seems most concerned about the Gazan faction of the Muslim Brotherhood. Cairo is afraid they will try to take over the government again.

“One odd thing, a relief flotilla from the US Sixth Fleet has abruptly changed course.”

David looked at IDF updates on an old-style tablet screen he had picked up at the last checkpoint. He checked the maritime updates.

“The aircraft carrier *Obama* has taken an offensive position in the Mediterranean off the coast of Israel. Why would they do that?”

“Maybe they have intel we don't.”

David noticed she answered very quickly.

“You must have more than that. If Syria attacks, we may need help bombing the crap out of them.”

Miss Aleph thought for a moment.

“Libyan-Moroccan factions have been developing submarines. Maybe they are stepping up their piracy activities to take advantage of the crisis.”

Five hundred meters away from the Knesset, they were funnelled into a kill box.

“What? A checkpoint? But we're Jewish,” his father said from the passenger seat. Though he was still able to joke, David could tell the rabbi was deeply troubled.

The stop line was a hundred yards away from a lone soldier manning an antitank missile station. The main forces protecting the seat of government were dispersed in trenches in order to survive determined thermal-detonator suicide attacks.

Miss Aleph got them through the first checkpoint, and the second.

Finally, they arrived in the Knesset's main parking lot. It looked like a

scene out of a film where the aliens had landed. A helo dropped its active camouflage and settled to the asphalt, pushing aside a small cloud of dust that caked David's windows.

"They're with us," David shouted over to some overeager reservist who looked like she was about to zip-tie Atticus and call for a cyborg containment cage for Sarge Bryan. They approached the entrance.

"We have to see the prime minister," Rabbi Baumann told the duty officer, who was just barely visible through a cluster of sandbags.

On the roof, the harsh light of arc lamps framed machine guns and missile batteries. The emergency bunkers were many stories underground. They got in the elevator, and David felt it start to move horizontally; he guessed they were moving southwest.

"Don't worry, Ms. Sato," the rabbi said. "This is the safest place in Israel."

His father had not seen the journalist face off against half a dozen mercenaries armed only with a dead body, a fake cyborg, and an attitude.

"Oh, I'm sure," she said, digging around in a canvas bag that held the remnants of her purse. "I was just concerned about what I can put on the record. It's my first time, really, being a war correspondent."

"You decided to jump in the deep end, ma'am," Atticus said.

"I'm sure the prime minister's press secretary will give you guidelines," the rabbi said politely. He stood in front of the doors, shifting his weight, waiting for them to open.

"So, you're David's father," Ellie chirped. "Was he always so athletic as a boy, or did he go through an awkward phase?"

Before she could ask about his childhood pets, the door slid open. A dozen Shin Bet heavies met them. They passed through multiple scanners and were wanded down twice. From around a curved concrete passageway, Prime Minister Drach suddenly appeared.

"Rabbi, I never thought to see you again," she said. Her pinched face and small eyes scanned the Americans and Ellie without surprise.

“Cease-fire talks did not go as planned,” his father said politely but stiffly. David sensed some tension between the rabbi and Drach.

“What do you know about the disaster at the Dome of the Rock?” Drach said.

His father looked unsteadily around the room.

David shook his head. “Not much more than anyone else. I was right next to the explosion, it was not accidental fire. Shaped charges went off in sequence, like a demolition.”

The rabbi appeared to lose his footing and grabbed David’s shoulder. He recovered quickly.

“I’m sorry. I need a moment.”

“After all you’ve been through, I don’t blame you,” the prime minister said. “Use this conference room. In the meantime, I’ll speak with the Americans. You’ve come from Jordan and Iraq, right?”

Atticus nodded. He, Sarge, Nobu, and Ellie went off with the prime minister. Mr. Perdix followed along, looking like he wanted to take a sample of the concrete matrix the bunker walls were made from.

The conference room door hissed closed, and David got the rabbi a glass of water.

“Pray with me, David,” he said, putting his hand on his shoulder and sitting him down opposite so their heads were quite close. He took out a small stylus inscribed with Hebrew lettering and pulled the flexible screen filament out a few square inches.

“...by the sons of Korach; as the deer cries longingly for brooks of water...”

The page was blank. The device played back his father’s voice, and the rabbi swayed forward and back. All the while, his lips did not move, until he whispered:

“Keep your head down, David. This is a white-noise projector. They cannot hear us if we speak softly, but we can’t do anything about the

cameras.”

David nodded and swayed.

The rabbi’s recorded voice continued: “*My tears have been my bread day and night...*”

“Do not react to what I’m about to show you. No matter how shocking it is.”

After the last two days, David doubted there was anything that would surprise him. He was wrong. The rabbi showed him a short video.

“B-but he’s dead,” David managed as the clip replayed on the tiny screen. “I’m certain. I killed Yossi.”

On Rabbi Baumann’s palm, shielded by the great wide shoulders of his black suit, surveillance video showed David exiting the Ministry of Defense building holding a black cat. That was the day he had, on the prime minister’s direct orders, quietly executed Defense Minister Yossi.

A minute later, the Defense Ministry elevator was called up to the floor he had just left. When the door opened, out walked Yossi.

Ben-zona, David thought, but he kept his expression neutral and his body swaying in prayer.

There he was, the dead man, pale faced and unsteady, but clearly walking under his own power. He disappeared into a passage which led to the basement of the Ministry complex.

“I don’t hold it against you,” the rabbi said. “Though I really wish you’d come to me first, before completing your assassination.”

“Is he alive?”

“No, quite dead. He was found in the basement near the empty bioweapons safe. He was then put back in his office. Unfortunately, in the time between when you set fire to his heart implant and when the video was taken, he did something he swore never to do while he lived. He unlocked Khóshekh, the ninth plague: Darkness.”

What...?

“It is a biogenic weapon based on the smallpox virus. At first, it was a way to develop vaccines against bioweapons we know our enemies have. Then, it was weaponized on a small scale as a deterrent. Over the last few months, it evolved into a weapon of unspeakable horror. Khóshekh. A method of killing ninety percent of the Arab population in Greater Israel.”

David felt the wind knocked out of him. He pretended to cough. His father put both hands on his shoulders.

“What do you mean he swore never to unlock the viral weapon?” David asked. “He was the leader of the Daggers of Ehud.”

“No. Yossi was our ally, trying to stop them. The real Dagger is—”

The door slammed open.

David whirled around. Rough hands grabbed him. A club hit Rabbi Baumann across the temple. David’s arms were pinned. He had no defense as a club swung again and again.

The recorded voice of his father kept playing.

“Like a sword in my bones, my adversaries disgrace me...”

OVER ISRAEL'S COAST

LIA

“We’re going to Haifa?” Lia yelled over the aircraft’s roar.

The jet was cold and noisy, the space inside tiny. The two seats were occupied by her parents. Lia and Eli stood, hanging on to straps attached to the ceiling. Once the sleek flyer folded back its insectile VTOL wings, it accelerated away from Jerusalem quickly. Very quickly. A stripped-down version of a LightningStrike X-Plane, it was clocking over one hundred knots.

“You want your parents on a Navy ship, don’t you?”

Eli still sounded as though he resented making the deal to send her parents to Greece along with Israeli government VIPs fleeing the country. Too bad for him.

The pilot turned sharply. Lia grabbed a spare intercom headset.

“Why the course change?”

“We have to come in to the naval base from the water,” the female pilot said from the cockpit. “They’re shooting down anything that flies in from the land side.”

“Who is?”

“Everyone.”

Haifa was more than one hundred kilometers north of Jerusalem. Close

enough to south Lebanon and even the annexed and embattled Golan Heights to be under attack from missiles, drones, and commando mortar squads.

When they approached the harbor, they found the central docks of the INS fleet bathed in dark. Only one floodlight flickered. Like a forlorn lighthouse, it blinked on and off.

“You’re still having trouble with power generation?”

Without juice, AIs like Miss Aleph and her big cousins were just fancy paperweights.

Eli shrugged. “We’ll fix it. I have you now.”

How was their mission way up north going to “save Israel,” as the Shin Bet chief had claimed? What was in the suitcase that was more important than all of the soldiers Eli had gotten killed back in Jerusalem?

The crescent of concrete and steel around the port city was home to Israel’s main flotilla of missile cruisers and submarines. The Navy kept very little legacy equipment. Once something was outmoded, it was sold, scrapped, or used as target practice. The Navy routinely participated in the highest-level war games with its allies around the globe.

Landing was the exact reverse of their takeoff. The dragonfly wings popped out, and they settled in a cloud of dust.

Eli kept a hold of his dark rectangular case. It seemed heavy. A group of Navy commandos met them. He pointed to Lia’s parents.

“Take this man and this woman to the INS *Quick Spear*. They are to be given immediate priority boarding. Go!” Eli yelled at the Navy officer.

The sleek stealth corvette was waiting at the first dock. Dozens of well-dressed and haughty-looking older people were carefully walking across the military-style gangplank. Maybe they were more used to oligarchs’ private yachts. There would be no purser waiting to show them to their cabins. But they would be out of the conflagration zone the Holy Land was fast becoming. If it had been bad before, the destruction of the Dome of the Rock and the bloodbath on the Temple Mount would spew gasoline over the

burning coals of madness.

“Try to message me as soon as you get to Greece,” she yelled to her parents as they hustled over to the other dock. “The old email we share should be working.”

Maybe afraid of Eli, the officer pushed past the line and got Mr. and Mrs. Suleiman onto the *Quick Spear*. They waved once, then went below deck.

Lia turned to Eli. She scanned the other docks. Nothing there looked like their ride. She was looking for a small incursion vessel piloted by robots. Lia expected the mission to be small scale and covert. Perhaps they were headed to Gaza, to analyze how the enemy was disrupting their networks.

Even in peacetime, Gaza is a hellhole. David barely survived it, Lia thought. Though she dreaded going there, it was a fair exchange now that she knew her parents were as safe as they could be. Instead of heading to a dock, Eli pulled her back into the dragonfly plane.

Eli yelled at the pilot, “Extra fuel tanks?”

“And two passengers lighter,” she said. “We’ll make it, just. Be prepared to get out and push the last kilometer.”

Eli did not laugh. A vein in his scalp next to his bluish scar seemed to pulse with menace.

Lia had a last look at Haifa. The lights of civilization struggled to stay on. The few streetlights that remained formed jittery pinpricks in the night. They were being steadily overwhelmed by bright flashes in the sky.

Enemy missiles came in, were intercepted. Most of them. Some landed. Lia saw puffs of orange flame spout up behind buildings. A few seconds later, sonic rumbles swept over the docks where they stood.

Israeli offensive missiles launched from land and cruise-missile frigates. The retribution salvos darted up through the hanging clouds of recent detonations. Bright tails of blue and gold sped them on their way to kill enemy launchers many miles away.

“Where to?” Lia asked Eli as they walked back to the landing pad.

He didn't answer right away. He grumbled as he checked their small aircraft making sure the ground crew had patched the holes in the fuselage. They got in and took off. The air-speed dial quickly passed Mach 1. There was only a slight vibration in the cabin and none of the disconcerting flapping noises they had made during their flight away from Jerusalem.

"You'll see where we're going soon."

Ninety bone-chilling and teeth-rattling minutes later, Lia totally did not. She did notice the fuel gauge was very low. Far on the black horizon, the lights of some small port glowed. Could be Italy, France, or even Spain. The pilot veered away. Lia tried to get up to look at the navigation display map. Eli stopped her from undoing her shoulder straps.

"Keep those on. It's going to get bumpy soon." Begrudgingly satisfying her curiosity, he added, "That was Corsica."

They were still over the open Mediterranean. Running on fuel fumes and inertia.

Eli yelled at the pilot, "Don't hit the boat!"

Boat?

A second later he added, "Don't kill us landing!"

Landing?

The blond Shin Bet operator grinned. He had put in a mouth guard to keep from biting his tongue off; it was painted to look like shark's teeth.

"Oh," he grunted, and he looked down at something in the passenger compartment. This was his negative grunt.

There were three life vests. Lia recognized the type—they were ones that kept you from drowning after a small aircraft you were in intentionally landed in water. Unfortunately, two of the three vests had been punctured by shrapnel from the firefight back in Jerusalem.

"You didn't check that?"

Eli shrugged. "No time. At least there's one, and I have buoyant body armor."

He inflated their only life vest and tied it, not around her, but rather around his little suitcase.

Huh?

Before she could flip out on him, they hit the water. The five-point harness bit deeply into all Lia's major body joints. They were ditching. The water was like corrugated black tarmac. The vertical takeoff wings tore away.

For a jittering instant, it felt like the plane was going to dip its nose and send them end over end. Finally, they stopped. Water rushed in.

"Now you can take your harness off," Eli said, mumbling through his mouth guard. He still seemed to be enjoying himself. When they stopped moving, he pushed her out. The plane was not intended to be ditched. After a pathetic minute of bobbing, it sank like a rock. Lia thrashed around, cursing Eli.

There was no light at all except the ones attached to the sinking aircraft and the helmets of the two pilots. She was having trouble remembering which was way up. She needed up. Up was air. Down was a cold death by drowning miles from land.

"Eli!" Lia swallowed a gulp of seawater. "Fuck—"

The Shin Bet man grabbed her hair and held her up. He activated a chemlight stick. It glowed neon orange and revealed Eli breathing under water. His shark-teeth mouth guard was also a kind of respirator. He swam with his face submerged, pulling her with one hand and his floating case with the other.

For a few minutes, Lia was too busy gulping air and keeping water out of her nose to be angry. Suddenly she knew what it felt like to be a migrant thrown overboard by Libyan people smugglers. Something whooshed around them. It was a silent motor attached to an inflatable boat. They hooked Eli with a plastic rod.

"Her next," Lia heard Eli say through waterlogged ears.

Strong, capable hands grabbed her under both arms and heaved her in

without tipping the small craft.

“I guess we can get those guys too.”

The boat crew picked up the two pilots.

Lia sat shivering. That madman could have warned her they were ditching. She spat salt water and leaned toward the middle of the boat.

“What—*hewrk*—now?”

He thought a second as though deciding what she needed to know. “First we catch our transport.”

Lia was expecting another cramped ride. She looked for the small coastal submersible like the ones they used to enforce the siege of Gaza and check for terrorist sea mines around Eilat. She did not notice the vessel’s outline until she was nearly close enough to touch it. It was that huge and dark. Judging by what showed of this metal whale above the churning black waters it had to be at least a football field in length. It could only be one boat.

“This is the *Magen*,” Lia gasped. It was one half of Israel’s second-strike strategic deterrent. Inside its hull was more firepower than was unleashed by all combatants during the Second World War, including the two atom bombs. The *Magen* was a continent killer.

“Hurry up,” Eli said, grabbing the rope ladder. “We’re going to France.”

...

Lia had worked on advanced coding for Navy AIs. Some of her algorithms went into Israel’s highly classified fleet of nuclear missile subs. However, Lia had only seen pictures of the country’s most devastating weapons systems. They were modern and ultra stealthy. The previous generation of Israel’s nuclear-armed subs were German-made Dolphin class. Their large torpedo tubes could launch atomic-armed cruise missiles which had a range of 1,500 miles.

This boat, the *Magen*, and her twin sister, the *Sica*, were based on the Swedish Gottland design. They followed the Typhoon and Ohio concept with vertical launch bays for multi-warhead ballistic missiles. The range and speed

were twice that of the Dolphin's cruise missiles. Tehran and Islamabad needed to feel vulnerable from all directions.

Lia was shivering as she got off the pontoon boat. She followed Eli down the ladder into the nerve center of the boat. The space was tight. Hull and motor noise insulation took up a lot of room. So did the eighteen intercontinental missiles, each with multiple H-bomb warheads.

"Well," Lia said, stepping down on the no-skid covered deck, "this ain't my grandfather's nuclear sub."

The crewman did not laugh. He just handed her a towel and dry clothes, then motioned her toward a curtained alcove.

Eli, half naked, barged onto the command deck.

"Where is Captain Heifetz?" he demanded.

"That would be me, Mr. Weissach," a sturdy Russian-looking woman said. She was middle-aged and had an imposing presence as she walked around the photonic mast sensor station, which still looked like an old-fashioned periscope.

"You've received my orders. Signed by the prime minister and the chief of the general staff?"

"I have," the woman said skeptically. She had risen to Aluf-Mishne rank in the Navy and been put in charge of the country's most deadly weapons platform. Captain Heifetz must have learned how to deal with salty sea dogs who wanted to test her. She was not going to take Eli's swaggering.

"But, Mr. Weissach, let's get one thing straight. This is my boat and my crew. The *Magen* is the country's final line of deterrent defense. I won't obey any orders that compromise our security for some joyride authorized by politicians."

Eli stared at her. His naked, salt-water-dripping abs rippled.

"Is that all you wish to say?"

"As for you and the other non-useful bodies you have saddled this fine boat and its crew with," she said, looking at Lia with disapproval, "please

note that this area is the conn. Important things you do not understand happen here. To cross the conn, you will stand over there and ask permission.” She nodded. “For now, that is all I have to say.”

Perhaps Heifetz expected some backtalk and was mentally bracing herself for an argument from the Shin Bet man. She should have braced herself for a more physical rejoinder. Eli’s back foot struck out, taekwondo style, into Heifetz’s guts. The sudden violent blow sent the woman reeling into the metal panel behind her. Dazed and probably near passing out from the devastating kick to her liver, she struggled to get up, hit her head again, and collapsed.

“Gag her and put her somewhere she won’t move from.”

Two internal security thugs were already on board; they expertly zip-tied Heifetz and dragged her off.

“Listen up, you assholes,” Eli said to the startled crew. “If this mission does not succeed, there won’t be an Israel to return to. There won’t be any enemy to drop your missiles on other than the raving jihadi fanatics who will be in charge of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. In which case, after you vaporize them, you might as well save the last nuke for yourselves.”

He grabbed a bespectacled Sgan-Aluf who was next in rank to the unconscious and manacled captain.

“Commander Anders, congratulations on your promotion. Here is the path and cruising depth you are to follow.” Eli handed him a data stylus. “Please inform your crew I value their service and contributions. The next person who questions my authority over this mission will be ejected through a torpedo tube.”

After the newly appointed boat chief got them underway, Lia met Eli in an alcove, where they changed into dry clothing. “Well, at least you let Heifetz have her say.”

Eli nodded. “To not let her finish her thoughts would have been rude.”

Whatever it was they wanted her to do near or in France, Lia resolved to

just get it over with. If she disobeyed, Eli would have no qualms about throwing her parents off the corvette headed for Greece.

“What now?”

Eli had taken over the captain’s ready room, which was about the size of a standing shower. He passed her some goggles.

“Learn how to use these in VR mode.” Eli looked closely at the dark circles she knew were hanging under her eyes. “Then get some rest. You look awful.”

...

Lia did not get much rest. She was assigned the *Magen* captain’s berth. Captain Heifetz had other accommodations under Shin Bet guard in sickbay. She had hit her head very hard.

The large nuclear missile sub was secured for silent running. As Lia lay on a musty plastic-smelling blanket, she found the silence claustrophobic. A dark cloth separated her single bunk from the walkway. Crew members passed. Their soft-shod feet padded along the gangway’s padded surface like underwater spectres haunting both sides of sleep.

Just as her mild pain-killers were kicking in and she had settled into the position on her bunk which hurt least, there was a soft tap outside her curtain. Because of the noise discipline, it was soft, though somehow it still managed to convey Eli’s obnoxious manner.

“Come on,” he said as she levered herself off of the really nice memory foam mattress. “We have to go over some details.”

From a glance at the navigation map, Lia estimated they were traveling submerged at about fifty kilometers per hour. Their jet helo had ditched before they had hit the densest part of France’s coastal radar. The *Magen* was passing between underwater sensor grids and listening posts. But why?

“I vote we save the briefing till the very last minute,” Lia joked.

Eli pointed to the next deck down. After stepping off the ladder, he looked at the engineering crew. They started to protest they were busy.

“Are we on course? Are the engines about to fail?”

The replies were affirmative and negative.

“Then get out.”

“This room is the most sound insulated on the sub,” Eli said.

He still had his luggage case with him, and he stowed it under the central table. Then he whipped open a scroll stylus. The size of a marker pen, the flexible screen soon expanded to cover most of the desk.

“I see from your file you are parachute qualified, but not glider trained.” Eli’s finger poked at the map, tracing marks on its touch-sensitive surface. “My other computer guy was glider trained.”

“The one who was killed following your orders.”

“The one who was killed while I was ordered to protect Rabbi Baumann.”

“How is my father-in-law, anyway? Last I saw he was facing a mob of a hundred thousand jihadis, alone.”

Eli’s pale lips compressed and expelled a silent whistle. The guy did not like to fail. Good. Lia did not like to get killed.

“Last I saw him, Major David Baumann had miraculously appeared and jumped on the platform. He had emerged from the area of the blown-up Dome of the Rock, the disaster which started the riot, which killed my first pick for this mission. That brings us here. Care to listen?”

“I don’t imagine we’ll be surfacing,” Lia said, drawing on her limited knowledge of Navy commando techniques. “So we’ll deploy underwater and meet with a transition team.”

Eli grunted affirmatively. Lia stared at the map outlines glowing on the screen filament. Eli pointed to a dark patch away from any town. “From this point on the French coast between Toulon and Cannes, we’ll move inland. Ground transport will meet us.”

“What’s the vehicle?”

“A party bus. We’re tourists from the UK. My paper ID will check out. In the unlikely event we’re stopped, only my online cover is established. Do not

take any ID with you.”

Blue, green, and red alternative infiltration route lines all went north, toward Geneva.

“The ground trip ends at Valleiry,” Lia said, “just before Switzerland. Are we stealing their secret chocolate recipes?”

“That is where you get to test your nonexistent ultralight piloting skills.” Eli zoomed in on the map and tilted it to 3-D display. He pointed at a geometric figure of order that stood out in the middle of winding country roads. “There. That is our goal.”

The place he pointed to was a small corporate nation. A historical overlay marked it as “CERN: Organisation Européenne pour la Recherche Nucléaire.” The world’s biggest communications company had bought the whole facility. Lichtwerks had turned it into the world’s neutrino-wave communications hub.

“The Lichtstrom?” Lia was confused and uneasy. “What the hell does that place have to do with saving Israel?”

“Everything,” Eli shot back. “A decade ago, Wolfgang Licht invented neutrino-based Wi-Fi. Unlike radio waves, neutrinos can pass through the Earth instead of needing fiber-optic cables and satellites.”

Basic physics. A single neutrino could travel through a piece of solid lead a light-year in diameter. Millions of neutrinos passed through everyone’s body each day. Their sources were solar fusion and supernovas. Only the Lichtstrom’s privately owned supercolliders had been able to use those particles to carry voice and data.

“In the last forty-eight hours, Shin Bet and Mossad have developed intelligence that those unblockable signals are hacking into Israel’s main defense networks.”

Lia got the implications immediately.

“So, even if you disconnect and reboot from a clean optical module...”

“They can reinsert any virus they want as soon as the system tries to

communicate to any other system. There is no way to stop them, except us.”

“That doesn’t completely make sense, Eli.” Lia was suddenly skeptical. “In order to hack Big Aleph, they’d have to have a back door.”

“Huh?”

“A crystal radio for neutrinos,” Lia explained to the non-techie. “It would have to connect at every critical juncture. I don’t buy it.”

“The prime minister and your brother-in-law do.”

“So, we’re going to drop in and ask Dr. Licht, one of the most reclusive people in the world, to stop spamming us?”

“That is Plan A. We have a range of persuasion techniques authorized.”

“What’s B?”

“If we cannot get to him, you’ll have to find a way to hack their system and shut it down.”

No one knew exactly what lay miles underneath the CERN reactors. The largest single machine on Earth powered a data hub with billions of links. Lichtwerks’ network was even connected to robots exploring Jupiter’s moons.

“That’s crazy.”

“You better think of a way. Because you’ll have half an hour before I employ Plan C.”

“What?” Lia searched for a ridiculous idea. “Launch a missile?”

Eli reached under the desk. He patted the mysterious case he had had since Jerusalem. Eli smiled his scary blond wolf smile.

“I don’t need the *Magen*’s nukes. I brought my own.”

UNDER GAZA

BOAZ

The trick, Boaz Baumann thought, was not letting his helpers see what they were hauling up from the hyperloop tunnel. He had ordered the squad of four Shin Bet thugs to winch up his precious cargo. The underground cavern echoed with squeals of the protesting block and tackle pulleys and the rattle of chains. Before the heavy load got to the lip of the shaft, he had to get rid of the guards. Even if he were a killer, he would not have had a chance of taking them all out. He had to trick them.

Fortunately, they trusted him. They trusted him for the same reasons they had followed his direction to prepare this cavern under Gazan territory. They recognized him as the second-in-command of the Daggers of Ehud, the deep-state organization that had taken control of Israel.

“Stop,” Boaz said. “Something is wrong with the generator.”

The four men immediately locked the winch and turned to him.

“I checked it this morning,” an unshaven goon called Uzi said impatiently.

“You checked it this morning?”

Uzi nodded vigorously. “Yes, Defense Minister, sir.”

“Unless you want to go up there”—Boaz pointed to the ceiling where thousands of microSwarm drones hung and buzzed and preened their carbon mesh wings—“to check the virus is not being damaged by too much heat,

figure out what's wrong."

The generator was an old one and would need at least two of them to remove its heavy housing. He needed them all to move through a heavy pressure door into the other room.

"All of you, go," Boaz said, pushing the larger men. "We have to move quickly; it's nearly time. I will watch the load."

The sworn fanatics loyal to the Daggers' perverted vision of the state of Israel left the main cavern and filed into the generator room.

He told them he was bringing up a conventional bomb to destroy the Khóshekh virus launch chamber after the launch. He glanced over the edge into the shaft. In the dim light, the top of the Spider was nearly visible. Uzi and his crew were loyal in the most evil ways possible, but they were not dumb. One of them might even recognize the country's first nuke. It was famous.

Boaz looked at the winch. He had no idea if he could lift it the rest of the way on his own. The four men were crowded around the air pump mechanism. Quietly, he walked up to the generator room and eased the heavy door shut. They did not react until he threw the bolt and cranked the four-way pressure seal. By the time Uzi yelled soundlessly at him through the tempered glass porthole, it was too late. They were trapped.

Up on the vaulted roof of the excavation, the drones' buzzing changed subtly in pitch. Boaz was nearly out of time. He went back, grabbed the chain.

Even with his full body weight, he had to brace himself with his legs to pull, *click*, pull, *click*. Inch by inch, the counterweight lowered down and the heavy bomb rose up into the stale dusty air of the main cavern.

The Andromeda option.

He had only half fibbed to his father, the rabbi. A nuclear detonation was the only way to guarantee destruction of the Khóshekh virus. Nothing could survive the fireball. However, once Boaz was made acting minister of

defense, he learned the full extent of the Daggers of Ehud network as Israel's deep state and how deeply Eli Weissach was involved. He realized their last-ditch plan would never work without a distraction.

He had to send Eli on a wild goose chase to France, where the French authorities were waiting for him. Hopefully, he would spend the rest of his miserable life in some dungeon of a prison. Eli was paranoid. To get him to believe the mission to the Lichtstrom was real, Boaz had had to part with the convenient twenty-kilo backpack nuke. He was forced to employ the Spider, which weighed as much as a small car.

The loading pallet finally rose high enough. Sweat streamed down his face. His hands cramped and shook. He took a breath, then swung the pallet over to the floor of the man-made cave.

His legs were about to give out; he sat. Directly above him, thousands of drones were ready for takeoff. Their bulbous midsections were filled with Khóshekh. On the surface, out in Gaza, were two million Palestinians. Since 1967, they and their ancestors had been inmates of the largest open-air prison in the world. Miri Drach had chosen to end their life sentence, with death.

A faint banging came from the generator room. Then Boaz heard louder thumps of bullets hitting the pressure door. He ignored them.

The Spider was a Hiroshima-sized bomb. His recent refresher course in applied physics told him it would produce a fireball a few hundred meters wide and 100,000,000° Celsius. It was the only way. The Andromeda plan was named after the fail-safe in an old science fiction thriller about a virus that had come from outer space. Khóshekh was all the more terrifying because it was made on Earth. By men. By scientists in Israel, of all places. He had to stop it.

Boaz looked at the Shin Bet guards. He was as trapped as they were. With the modern Gamad suitcase nuke, he could have set the kiloton yield and a timer, then climbed out the airshaft or out through the hyperloop train tunnel. The Spider had no such luxury features. It was purely an old-school analog

WMD. He would not be getting out.

Boaz recovered his breath. He rolled sideways on the filthy floor, got up, and pushed the Spider onto a chassis riding along the narrow rail tracks. They had been built in the style of a coal mine to remove the excavated dirt. He locked the chassis brakes and checked the drone launch countdown clock.

He would have to multitask. He had a lot of work to do and a call to make to Prime Minister Drach in her Knesset bunker.

95

INS *MAGEN* MEDITERRANEAN

LIA

“Do we even know what’s inside the CERN/Lichtstrom super collider?” Lia asked Eli.

The whole mission plan was laid out in front of them on the navigation console. It left Lia confused. Worse, she suspected Eli Weissach was in over his head.

“You better have more information before you go tinkering with the world’s largest machine.”

Generating stable neutrino fields was way past her introductory physics courses.

“I won’t be tinkering with it,” Eli said smugly. “You will.”

His endearing habit of beating the shit out of anyone who disagreed with him might have kept her quiet before. But not tonight. Lia demanded answers.

Eli puffed out his cheeks and flexed his bruised knuckles but complied.

“My Shin Bet code jockeys were curious when Big Aleph, the main military AI, was experiencing his current problems. Mossad sent in two of their top people to the Lichtstrom. They were assisted by Bulgarian covert contractors.”

“And?”

“Twelve hours later we found the Mossad team in a Lyons nightclub frequented by drug addicts. They were perfectly fine; they just couldn’t recall the previous two days. They kept insisting they were late for an urgent mission.”

“And your local fixers?”

“We never heard from those Bulgarians again.”

Eli pulled up a topographic map of the territory outside Geneva, which had been ceded to the corporate nation. He zoomed in on a hilly wooded area on the northeast side of the Lichtstrom.

“This area of the grounds is called Die Zauberwald, the Magic Forest. It is in the middle of Dr. Licht’s corporate kingdom. That’s where we’re landing.”

Lia wished someone like David were around, someone who could beat up Eli. Or at least someone like Miss Aleph, who could give him lip without fear of physical violence.

“Put those on.”

The pair of goggles was completely opaque. She put them on and looked out at glowing neon squares. They were only millimeters in front of her but gave the impression of miles of virtual space.

“There’s a VR grid.”

“We’ll do a few simulated test runs using the mini-gliders. Takeoffs and landings are guided by landmarks not GPS.”

“That’s good. GPS, European Galileo, Chinese Big Dipper, and even Russian GLONASS are screwed right now.” Lia tried to recall what she knew about Lichtwerks Corp. “Der Lichtstrom is a corporate EU nation. It has pledged to never have weaponry.”

“They have the most devastating weapon of all: control over data flow,” Eli said vehemently. “Israel is just a test. They don’t need conventional armaments to bring a nuclear-armed regional superpower to its knees.”

A virtual view resolved in front of Lia. The goggles showed a big forest,

the trees growing in a grid pattern. Behind that appeared a structure that looked like a cross between Notre Dame Cathedral and Sauron's Tower in *Lord of the Rings*. Leading up to it was a wide road.

"That's Seven Rays Avenue, the motorway from the French border. Keep it to your left if you get attacked."

"Who's going to attack? They have no weapons."

"No offensive weapons. They have unarmed drones that can rip your ultralight aircraft's wings off. All through the Magic Forest are high-intensity lasers that can blind human and mechanical pilots."

Opaque goggles made sense. As long as the optical sensors recovered when they were blasted.

Lia whipped off her headset. "Why didn't we just take a longer-range plane and fly from Haifa to the glider takeoff point?" Lia asked, though she suspected the answer. "We had a perfectly good plane. Now it's at the bottom of the Mediterranean. Using Israel's second-strike nuclear insurance policy as a taxi ride seems a little showboaty."

"Because the intifada war has put the whole region on high alert. No jet with the range we need could penetrate Eurodefense airspace."

Lia looked at the map of Der Lichtstrom again. The Magic Forest in her virtual world had been teeming with unblinking eyes.

"There's no way we're getting in without detection."

"Don't worry," Eli said arrogantly. "We have organized some distractions. There's a back way in, and some people on the inside to lead us to the underground nerve center."

"Bulgarians again?" Lia asked skeptically.

Eli did not reply. Had the previous entry team been sold out?

"By the way, did I thank you for the opportunity to show off my coding skills as your second choice for the mission?"

"Actually, in terms of skills, you were Big Aleph's top pick. The programmer who was killed was one you were training, Abe Karem. He

scored higher in loyalty to the state.”

Shit. Damn, she thought. *Abe*. Aspiring amateur comedian, little Abe, who brought in the smelliest bagels in Tel Aviv to their office because he thought it was funny. He wore that stupid hat with the drawstrings on it and always droned on about how settlement girls were easy. He had talent, but he had a lot to learn. He was twenty years old, and now this latest conflict had killed him. *Abe... This fucking war*.

Eli picked Abe over her because he was a Jew and she was an Arab Christian. He did not have to say it. She hadn't known.

On top of everything else, Lia could not help thinking that if Eli had picked her instead of Abe, Spencer and Steph might still be in a basement shelter in Tel Aviv, alive. The randomness, the unfairness of it. It was almost too much.

“This better be worth it,” Lia said bitterly.

“Worth it? Of course it's worth it. That's why I have this to ensure success.” He patted his case.

“Right. Your little carry-on nuke. I nearly forgot about it,” Lia said with sarcasm Miss Aleph would have approved of. “With all the big H-bombs on this sub, it seems so harmless.”

Eli laid the case on the floor. It had a simple luggage lock which he snapped open.

“It's been authorized live by three members of cabinet. I'll give you the final arming codes when we're inside Der Lichtstrom. But you should see the basics now.”

Eli flipped the case open.

“It's a dial-a-yield system, up to two thousand tons of TNT equivalent. Implosion atomic. Based on the old US W54, with some improvements. That's the timer. It's analog.”

Eli pulled out a red handle with a sudden move that made Lia grimace.

“This is the manual detonation switch, pull and twist. Even if the timer is going, the handle just overrides and puts it to zero and accomplishes the

mission.”

To Lia it looked like a small espresso maker, covered with chrome and a few dials and a keypad.

“Just an EMP wouldn’t be enough?”

Eli shook his close-cropped head. She noticed scars along one side, as though he’d tried to comb his short blond hair with razor wire a long time ago.

“Not sure enough. With this, we can be sure.”

“I have every faith in your skills of persuasion and my on-site hacking skills.” She gently shut the case. “You’ll be able to return it unused and get your deposit back.”

He packed the device away.

The *Magen* navigation guys were lurking in the narrow corridor. They looked eager to get back to their jobs steering the sub.

“We’re nearly there,” Eli said, rolling up his scroll stylus and waving the crew members back in. “Keep your goggles handy. You’ll need them in a minute.”

She followed Eli to the bow of the boat.

The series of apertures at the front of the sub were multipurpose ports. They could eject torpedoes, underwater drones, and Israeli agents.

Lia let Eli pat down her jacket. She turned out her pockets. “See? Nothing, no ID, just like we agreed.”

Then, when Eli was putting his own goggles on, she repocketed her IDF wallet and her so-so luck charm, the Egyptian eye symbol she had borrowed from their new cat, Khóshekh.

“The engine crew are all loyal,” Eli told his Shin Bet confederates. “If the bridge crew gives you any trouble...”

“We know,” a black Shin Bet guard replied. “A stern warning, then off the boat.”

Then Eli and Lia lay down in side-by-side torpedo-shaped underwater

vehicles.

As the transparent hatch closed, Eli told her: “Don’t touch the controls unless it stops following my tail beacon.”

Being ejected from the *Magen* was not as uncomfortable as she had imagined. There was a moment of claustrophobia as she heard the tube filling with water, then a forward acceleration. She floated in a hollow Plexiglas log in a pitch-black sea.

Lia’s VR came on. Multibeam sonar, thermal, and enhanced optics view flickered on in Lia’s goggles. After a few seconds of quiet, motors kicked in beneath her feet. Her pod followed the pink triangle ahead of her.

Something few people knew: She hated the water. When her parents forced her in up to her knees into the Jerusalem aquatic center, she violently protested about being a desert creature like their Bedouin ancestors. The thought of being underneath hundreds of tons of water gave her the creeps. Well, as long as it stayed on its side of the carbon fibre exterior, she could bear it.

The oxygen indicator had only made it halfway to “recharge” level when she felt a solid bump. Gravelly sand ground under the hull, and waves thumped against the side of her torpedo-shaped underwater vehicle. They had landed on some isolated shore of France.

Eli yanked her lid open and jerked her up. It was really dark.

“Wait a damn second,” Lia said, pulling her arm away. “I can’t see a thing. How am I supposed to hack anything if I fall and break my arm?”

With a grunt, Eli fixed her goggles.

“It’s only first-gen night vision, but it should help you not be clumsy.”

Lia’s view of the beach and the surf was like looking through two long tubes covered by translucent green tape. They hauled the escape tubes ashore. She could sense his impatience. At least he stuck with protocol. Securing their transport so that it did not drift away was standard operating procedure, no matter how unlikely they were to need it.

“Where are your people?”

Eli swivelled his head, trying to orient himself with his narrow field of vision.

He pointed. “That direction.”

They tromped over the beach. It was not a nice one. Half covered by stones and jagged boulders, it was unlikely to be used during daylight hours, much less the dead of night. Lia kept her headgear aimed down. Soon the rocks ended, and sharp clinging grass reeds were ripping at her clothes. It made Velcro tearing noises.

“Shhh.”

“I’ll tell the grass to shut up,” Lia whispered back.

They came to a sandy path up to a road a few minutes later. There were rotting wooden telephone poles with no wires between them. Far on the horizon, a yellow-green glow may have marked the lights of a town or maybe just a way station for self-driving trucks. Little dark specs slid across the lighter areas. The goggles must have sand in them, she thought.

“Stop dawdling,” Eli said. “I see my guys.”

The specks in the sky did not go away even when she shook her head. In fact, they remained in formation on the horizon.

“Uh, Eli, are drones part of your covert infiltration?”

“No, why?”

“Because—”

The dark was blasted away by harsh floodlights. Lia’s goggle view washed out into bright white. A spray of sand erupted around them, and plastic sheets crinkled. Armed men popped up from hiding spots under the grassy sand.

“Gendarmerie Maritime! Arrêtez où vous êtes. C’est les mains en l’air.”

Before Eli could do anything dumb or Lia could say anything smart like ask for directions, both their hands were pinioned behind their backs.

This was no chance encounter. This was an ambush. They had been set up and walked right into the trap.

KNESSET BUNKER

DAVID

The Shin Bet goons beat David's father with clubs. His glasses flew off, making a bloody spatter on the ground.

David tried to shield the softer parts of his own head from the blows of the truncheons. Years of practice in the Occupied Territories had taught these enforcers how to stun, disable, or kill with a simple striking rod.

As the blows landed, they drove truth into his thick skull. David cursed himself for not having seen it; for having dragged his friends into Drach's lair; for killing Yossi. The defense minister had been innocent! He opened his mouth to say... what? It did not matter. A knee came up and nearly broke his jaw.

They double flex-cuffed the rabbi and used advanced restraints on him. They put steel cuffs with leather mitts to prevent lock picking on David. A manacle chain locked his hands to his waist and a strangle, freshly oiled cord chafed around David's neck.

They pushed his head down so he could only see the soles of the rabbi's shoes. A rough, calloused hand jammed into his pocket and grabbed Miss Aleph.

"Don't breakth that," David managed to say through blood and spit.

"Why not? I hate AIs," the helmeted thug growled. "Anything that thinks

it's a person but isn't should be destroyed."

He put Miss Aleph on the ground. She freaked.

"Ahhhhhh!"

The second guard stopped him. "Don't stomp on it. Take the battery out. It may have information Minister Drach wants."

Why? Why didn't his father tell him back at the Western Wall? He could have neutralized the two Yamas guys in seconds. Now they were all in a Knesset bunker a kilometer from the parliament buildings at least a hundred meters under the streets of Jerusalem.

They dragged them into the next room over. It was a big situation room with multiple monitors. They forced David and the rabbi down into steel chairs.

If Drach was the leader of the Daggers of Ehud, and Yossi was innocent, then Boaz and the rabbi must be working against Drach. He had killed Defense Minister Yossi like the trained obedient attack dog he was. No wonder his father had not trusted him.

"We're all here now," Prime Minister Drach's icy voice said. "Good."

Blood ran into David's eye. He angled his head to let it drip the other way. The Americans and Ellie Sato were there, tied up and seated against the far wall. Atticus, Nobu, and Mr. Perdix were chained to each other. The albino sergeant had a hood over his head; beside him, Ellie had her hands cuffed behind her. A big floor-to-ceiling display dominated the left wall. Next to that was a set of steel double doors.

"You murdering traitor—"

A gloved hand slapped David's mouth and cut off his words to Israel's head of state.

He counted eight Shin Bet shock troopers in helmets and armor, a pair on each side of the room. Not that there was any way out of his cuffs or the steel chair they had him tied to. It was overkill. They were all helpless.

Atticus looked grim. His injured leg in its high-tech cast lay splayed out in front of him. David could not tell if Sarge Bryan was conscious or not. They

had recognized that his cybernetic eyes might be able to record video and so they had put a blackout hood on him. His head was slumped toward Ellie Sato, who sat to his left, glaring daggers at their captors.

“Rabbi Baumann,” Drach said, “can you hear me? I’m so glad those swine didn’t kill you at the Western Wall.”

David’s father sat stoically in his big metal chair.

She continued. “They will, of course. The city is so dangerous tonight. But first you will witness the birth of the real Eretz Israel. The pure nation that has been waiting since 1948 to be born.”

“On the back of...” David’s father, started, then spat blood through welling lips. “On the back of genocide. One way or another, people will know. They always do.”

The PM’s smile was thin and curt and chilled David to the core. She switched on the main view screen. It was a regional map centered on Greater Israel.

“Big Aleph has made a census, Project Quirinius. The green clusters are remaining pockets of Arabush scum. Yellow dots are for the rightful heirs of Judea and Samaria. Over the next few weeks, the green dots will all wink out with a minimal loss of yellow dots.”

So it was true. Drach was about to release Khóshekh.

“The vaccines,” his father protested, as though there were a chance to reason. “They’re outdated. You used the Arab Genome Project to make it more deadly for the Palestinians. But the virus has mutated out of your control.”

The prime minister, who was not a large or physical woman, surprised David. In a fit, she shoved a metal chair. It slid halfway across the concrete floor and clattered down, making a discordant metallic echo between the bunker’s concrete walls.

“*That’s* why we must act now,” she hissed, blotches on her face blooming purple with rage. “Yossi claimed he had developed new updated antiviral

agents. He pleaded for time to make ten million doses. Right then, I stopped trusting him.”

Drach stared with homicidal lust at the green dots.

“There must be no turning back. We must ‘burn the boats.’ Yes, some Jews will die, but our country will be saved. Even if they kill me and raid our stockpiles of antiviral, they will not be able to stop Khóshekh before its work is done. No one can.”

The truth threatened to choke David faster than if the wire noose around his neck had been cinched tight.

“You’ve been planning this for years,” he said.

“David,” the rabbi said, “the Daggers have been at this for decades. IDF military, including Haredi volunteers and their families, are always vaccinated from military stockpiles. Arab citizens of Israel are excluded from military service. It was easy for Drach to give them anything she wanted.”

“And bide our time until the right moment,” Drach said. “Which came when the Grey Wolves attacked Iraq and Jordan.”

“You knew about that?”

“Knew? We had to help them every step of the way. Their pathetic infiltration through the Dead Sea pipelines like a line of sewer rats?” She shook her head. “We could have flushed them out at any time. Fortunately I have excellent relations with General Uri of the Air Force.”

“Had,” David managed to say, though he was close to blacking out again as the blows he had suffered made him dizzy and feel like retching. “*Had* good relations with the IAF. Everyone will turn on you now. You’re through, Drach.”

“You needed the chaos.” The rabbi’s steely eyes rose to meet his enemy’s. “You actually believe you are going to survive this.”

“Even if the Europeans or someone else discovers the virus is a biogenic weapon,” Drach confirmed, “who will the world believe is responsible? Poor embattled Israel or the monstrous Islamic hordes?”

Drach was planning to set herself up as the hero of the Apocalypse, David realized.

“You’re going to blame it on the insurgents. You’ll say Grey Wolves deployed Khóshekh and their attack backfired. If you’re lucky, it’ll give you enough political cover to drop megaton nukes on Iran.”

A wheezing laugh escaped David’s lips. How could he have been so stupid?

Drach raised her thinly drawn eyebrows. “They’re all crazy terrorists. Haven’t you been reading the news for the past century?” The prime minister cast a longing glance at Greater Israel on the big screen. “During the Second World War, the Palestinian leader Amin al-Husseini demanded Hitler systematically murder our people. He swore ‘This was and will remain an Arab land, the Zionists will be massacred to the last man, and nothing but the sword will decide the future of this country.’ Husseini never faced justice. In 1974, he died of old age, a free man. Today, we pay that blood debt.”

One of the Shin Bet guards whispered to Drach.

She gasped. “But how?” Then she turned a wicked hateful eye to the rabbi. “You might as well speak up. In a few minutes, it won’t matter. There’s nothing the Americans can do.”

On the wall, the picture changed to a map of the East China Sea. Shanghai was on the left and the islands of Japan to the right. A red triangle pulsed in the middle of the blue, presumably the last location of the nuclear submarine.

“The *Sica* has been destroyed.” Drach stepped forward and grabbed the rabbi by his hair. “What did you tell them?”

“As much as I could,” the rabbi spat back. “They would have intervened if not for your threats to launch missiles at the most populated cities on the planet.”

“You just killed one hundred and twenty brave Israelis,” Drach said. She threw his father’s head to one side, nearly toppling him over in his chair. “I still don’t understand it. The *Sica* could have been in any of ten thousand

locations. How did they find the sub?”

“The Chinese destroyed it,” the Shin Bet man said, looking at the screen of his mobile device. “They did not find the sub’s location. They launched missiles, submersible drones, and homing torpedoes at every possible location it could be. Their planes and ships sent out ten thousand anti-submarine warheads in less than ten minutes. The *Sica* had nowhere to run.”

“Their sacrifice will not be in vain.”

David’s feeble hopes vanished. Drach had already bought herself enough time. Miss Aleph had told him the Sixth Fleet was off the coast in an attack formation. But even if they nuked the Knesset, Drach’s plan would succeed.

“You’d risk watching the world burn so you can get on with your ethnic cleansing?” David could tell his father was at a loss.

“There is only one country that matters. Only one people,” Drach said. Behind her eyes, the embers of her madness fanned into tiny glinting flames.

A Shin Bet guard touched his hand to his helmet. “The drone launch site is online.”

“Finally,” she said. “Now witness how a true patriot acts. Your own son Boaz will release Khóshekh.”

The map disappeared. The picture on the big screen was replaced with a live video feed from a cavern. Bright lights in the background nearly washed out the picture. The camera seemed to be a cheap one embedded in a laptop.

The figure came into focus. It was David’s brother.

“Your own sons have forsaken you, Rabbi,” Drach said.

David recognized the place. It was the same excavation Drach and Eli had showed him as evidence against former Defense Minister Yossi. She had claimed Yossi was the head of the Daggers of Ehud and was killing hundreds of moderate Palestinians. All the while, she was planning to eliminate all Arabs.

“Are you sure, Miri?” the rabbi asked, using Drach’s first name. “At school you always talked an A plus and produced a B minus.”

David was confused. His father was avoiding looking at Boaz's picture on the screen. He was barely able to look at the screen.

Drach rounded on the rabbi.

"Look who just scored an *F*," Drach said. "You and David will be control specimens to see how long the virus takes to kill people treated with the old vaccine." She turned to the Americans. "And they will tell us how long it takes to work on those with no vaccine at all."

"Open a channel with Boaz." She pointed at the hooded figure of Sarge Bryan. "If anyone speaks, shoot that subhuman thing."

One of the Shin Bet smoothly pulled a sidearm and aimed. Sarge Bryan did not move; he might have a broken back. His head was rigidly tilted toward Ellie, who was bound with multiple zip ties.

Boaz was waiting for a reply.

"Hello," Drach said. "Can you hear me?"

"I can hear you now," Boaz said with some relief. "I thought I would have to do this without an audience. I can't see your side. Is Father there?"

"No." Drach shot a glance at the rabbi. "But he escaped the incident at the Temple Mount and is safe. Show us what you are doing."

"If you insist," Boaz said. "But you may not like how the program ends."

Boaz shifted the camera over to a locked door. A round safety-glass porthole framed one fellow in a red smock hood yelling soundlessly. Flames of a welding torch blazed on the other side of thick glass.

"I've had to keep your technicians out of this area. That door won't hold for long, but I think I can finish my work in time."

"What are you doing?" the prime minister demanded.

Boaz moved back over to the other side of the chamber, light flared from an arc lamp, blanking the whole screen for a moment. When the image resolved, Drach, David, and everyone in the room except for Rabbi Baumann gasped.

In the middle of a small railway tram, similar to what one would find in a

coal mine, was Israel's first nuclear weapon: the Spider. The inscription plaque was smudged with the orange dirt of Gaza. In Hebrew it read: "Never Again."

"You..." Drach shrieked.

Boaz pulled his earpiece out and threw it.

"I had to use the suitcase nuke to decoy Eli," he said, picking up a delicate-looking pair of pliers. "This is my backup plan. Unfortunately, it weighs a metric ton."

Boaz, an able chess player, had been thinking several moves ahead. Even in the nuclear warehouse in the Negev, he had been planning this.

"The Spider has pluses and minuses," Boaz said, continuing his monologue. "The plus being that its storage had no secondary security system like the suitcase nuke. It was not hard to steal. Really, who would imagine shoplifting this?"

He patted the round steel case, which spewed wires in clumps like some arachnid with a hundred legs.

"The downside is, it has no remote trigger. It was meant to be delivered on a plane or a lorry on a one-way trip to Cairo or Damascus."

Above Boaz, near the ceiling, came an ominous whirring noise. A sound like a thousand angry bees in a plastic bag echoed through the tunnel.

"I have to hurry," Boaz said. A sheen of sweat glistened on his forehead and upper lip. "The drones are full of Khóshekh virus. I was too late to stop your technicians from loading them. They're the latest Worldwide Help microSwarm robots. Even if I take out the command center, they'll go on their programmed routes, stinging as many Gazans and West Bank Arabs as possible."

Veins on the prime minister's emaciated head and neck bulged so large David thought they would burst. "Get a team down there. Stop him."

"We're trying," a Shin Bet guard said as he jabbed at his console. "The only communications that work are the fiber cables. Boaz controls them."

Boaz brought the camera down to ground level as he worked.

“As we thought about how to stop Khóshekh,” Boaz said, working away at something underneath the Spider, “there was one insane plan we discussed if the virus should ever be deployed. We called it ‘Andromeda’ after *The Andromeda Strain*, the science fiction novel. In it, the last line of defense against a microbe from space is an atom bomb.

“In the book, it never went off. But here we are, at the last chapter of the terrible book written by you, Minister Drach, and the rest of the Daggers. Now only one thing is left... *ugh!*”

His pliers slipped. He recovered his tool and pushed apart some wires under the bomb’s casing.

“I have a decent understanding of the principles. However, this is fifty-year-old circuitry. It reminds me of an Atari video game I took apart once.” Boaz smiled wistfully. “Boy, was David mad when he saw the guts of it on the floor. If he ever hears this, he’ll be even madder to see that I was bluffing back in the Negev. The timer I pretended to set off was a circuit diagnostic. His wife, Lia, would have spotted that. Such a nice woman, and so smart.”

Boaz’s head ducked closer to the camera lens. It partially fogged up from his breath.

“Actually setting off the Spider is much... more ... Ah, let me... just try...”

The picture cut out and turned into a wall of static.

David couldn’t tell if the final image of Boaz, smiling as he did when he’d figured something out, was burned into the screen or his own eyes as he blinked.

Beside him, his father seemed to sink into his black suit. The eight Shin Bet guards just stared at the blank screen. Only the PM was animated. Didn’t she know she was beaten? Boaz had vaporized the Khóshekh weapon and himself.

“Get a picture online! Show me the damage. There must be something we

can sal—”

About ten seconds after the screen had gone blank, a false and unnatural earthquake shook the Knesset bunker. Iron rebar deep within their concrete hideaway groaned with the strain.

“*Gaaarh!*” Drach cursed and spat.

The screen flickered. The map of Israel returned. On it was a bleeding red spot on the border with Gaza. Big Aleph’s automatic monitoring system reported.

Radiological Alert.

Atomic event detected.

35 kiloton yield estimated.

The speakers only played static. Even the prime minister remained silent as a series of aftershocks pulsed through the underground chamber.

David felt as though all the tons of earth above had suddenly come loose and were crushing down on him. He struggled for breath. Boaz *had* nuked Gaza, but not to destroy it. He had manually detonated the old atomic bomb to save millions of Arabs from a hideous death.

“The Andromeda option,” muttered the rabbi, still slumped down beside David’s chair. “It was the only way.”

The low groaning from the reinforced concrete of the bunker faded. Another sound, breathless, shrill, and equally inhuman rose in its place.

Drach looked like she wanted to scream but could not draw in any breath. She grabbed a gun from the guard standing over Sarge Bryan. She walked toward the rabbi, jerking on the trigger.

It did not fire.

The prime minister paused. Spittle rolled down her chin as she fiddled with the safety catch. She had probably not held a weapon since her time in the reserves. She finally got it. The weapon clicked, ready to fire.

“Now, you join your bastard son!”

At that instant, of all the people in the room, only David was looking toward the opposite wall where the Americans were slumped. Ellie Sato had

somehow freed her hands from the zip tie cuffs and was furiously jabbing at Atticus's plastic leg prosthesis. On the other side of Atticus, Mr. Perdix's face was frozen between a self-satisfied smile and a grimace. Like he was bracing himself for something. *What?*

Ellie Sato finally pushed the right switch. David could tell because Atticus's leg cast exploded. Drach covered her head and lurched toward the big steel doorway. A hundred thumbnail-sized balls flew and bounced through the confined bunker. These in turn also exploded like marshmallow cluster munitions. Pellets the size of pinheads stuck to anything organic. Faces, hands, arms, the backs of necks.

One landed on David's cheek. It instantly numbed. He knew what was up and what he had to do.

With both hands cuffed to the sturdy steel chair, he started heaving it three yards over to the main doorway. In the confusion of the unexpected explosion, no one stopped him. Drach got white sticky blobs in both eyes. She dropped her pistol and tried to wipe it off, then staggered and collapsed backward.

David's blood pressure fell rapidly. He had to block the entrance before he blacked out. There were fifty guards outside. He had just about made it. Then he lost sensation in his legs and toppled backward, just inches away from jamming the main doors shut.

Ms. Sato, showing no effects from the explosively delivered anesthetic, saw. She figured out what he was doing. Her legs still cinched together, she hopped like a madwoman across the room and pushed him the last few inches.

He looked up into her Eurasian features.

He said, "Ms. Sato, your hair, it's a m—"

David passed out.

KNESSET BUNKER**ELLIE**

Ellie's elbows banged fiercely on the bunker's concrete floor.

Oh, bloody hell!

After helping David block the door with the steel chair he was bound to, she hopped a few times with her legs tied together by long plastic ties and then toppled over. Despite the antinarcotic they had all taken, she felt very woozy indeed. The only thing that had gone as planned was their being held prisoner in a room small enough to ricochet all the little blobs of anesthetic beeswax, or whatever Mr. Perdix had called the stuff, that had exploded from Atticus's leg splint.

"Good work," Atticus said, still chained to the wall behind her. "Now find the keys to our cuffs."

The good work was total mayhem. One of the guards, who looked like he could snap her neck with one hand, was still awake and had her by the ankle. Fortunately he had received a snout full of knockout snot, and his grip was as weak as a kitten. She shook him. Then, using her hands to slide herself along, lurched toward the door.

"Hang on! This is my first time... doing whatever we're doing!"

She needed to check the outer door first. Things would all be scotched badly if the fifty guards outside were able to come in. David, the poor

brutalized man, had been trying to block it when he passed out. She confirmed the door was properly jammed. None too soon. Heavy fists pounded dully from the other side of the steel panels.

Her head was feeling very light. Even kneeling, she had to steady herself against a wall. Everyone but her was tied up or unconscious.

“Just hang on, Ellie,” Atticus’s voice behind her said encouragingly. “Take your time.”

“Get the keys,” Mr. Perdix slurred. He was slumped over like a rough sleeper on Oxford Street. He must have gotten a larger dose of his own medicine.

She looked through the pockets of the closest guard. No keys, but there was a knife. She cut her legs free of zip ties.

“I didn’t get splattered, but... I ain’t gonna be much help,” Sarge Bryan said from under his hood.

Nobu groggily urged her, “Take anoizzer hit of antidote.”

Ellie’s wrists stung where Sarge had used some kind of heat vision from his cybernetic eyes to melt her plastic cuffs until she could work her hands free. The original plan had been for Atticus to be freed first, but then they’d slapped steel cuffs on him.

What had Nobu said? Something she should do? Oh, right. Antidote. Brilliant idea.

Ellie hunched over, hands on her knees. Even though she could stand, she was starting to see stars with very step. She pulled at some plastic-wrapped syringes concealed in Atticus’s leg device; took one and stuck it up her nose, then depressed the plunger. Sharp-smelling mist hit her sinuses. She had the urge to spit up and would have if people had not been watching. Instead, she let the oily antidote trickle down the back of her throat.

She felt better.

“Take care of the hostiles first,” Mr. Perdix directed.

“Don’t be dumb,” Atticus countermanded. “There’s too many of them. We

don't know who will recover first."

"She should shoot them."

"Mr. Perdix, she..." Ellie said.

Her head was starting to buzz, as though she had just downed a Red Eye triple espresso at Caffè Nero.

"She... is British," Ellie finished. "She is not shooting unconscious people, thank you very much."

The pounding on the outer door stopped and was replaced by a heavy metal-on-metal thumping that rattled the chair David was still bound to. In her hand a vial of antidote, still three-quarters full. David had complex-looking bindings. Moving very quickly now, she jammed the blunt syringe up Rabbi Baumann's nose.

"Sorry, Mr. Rabbi, I know this is probably some sort of sin, but it can't be helped." The vial hissed and emptied itself into the man's thankfully large nasal cavity.

The doorway was straining open. The only thing jamming it was David's chair. Even though it was steel, its rivets were popping off. Ellie spotted a large bolt mechanism on either side of the rattling doors.

"How do I operate this?"

"Try the... red handle," Nobu said weakly.

She did, with success. Three cross pieces dropped smoothly down and barred the door.

"They're not going to use explosives, not yet," Atticus added helpfully.

The rabbi jerked awake. Ellie cut the bindings off the older man. With Rabbi Baumann's help, Ellie searched for the keys to the manacles. It was a bit like those online puzzle popups. She had gotten rather good at playing those while she was pretending to write her *Citizen Juggernaut* column.

One of the guards tried to get up. The rabbi struck him with a baton and tied his hands. He also had Drach's pistol and looked like he had fewer reservations about dispatching helpless enemies.

“Thanks,” Atticus said after his bonds were off. He jammed a syringe up his own nose and passed the remainder to her. “Wake David.”

When they removed Sarge Bryan’s hood, he did not move right away.

“Sorry to burden you,” the albino man said. “But heating up the lock on Ms. Sato’s zip ties has plum burned out my ocular implants.”

“Sarge, you got no more heat vision?” Nobu said.

“Right now I got no vision.” He shook his head. “You’ll have to leave me here.”

Ellie rubbed her blistered wrist. Now she felt horribly guilty his bionics had burned out while he had freed her.

“Like heck, Sarge,” David Baumann said, clearing his throat and spitting. “No one’s staying behind. Where did they put Miss Aleph and her batteries?”

Moments later, the pocket AI was awake and looking out of Sarge’s chest pouch with her half dozen spider eyes.

“How’s that, Sergeant Bryan?”

He blinked, turned his head, then remembered he was only able to see what Miss Aleph could. Sarge Bryan turned his torso around the room.

“Kinda strange. Like seeing the world through a phone camera.”

“Ahem.”

“A really expensive, intelligent phone cam. Thanks, Miss Aleph.”

“I know the way out,” Rabbi Baumann said. “There’s an emergency exit for government officials if the main tunnels collapse under bombardment.”

Mr. Perdix handed David a vial of antidote. The Israeli soldier propped Prime Minister Drach up against a wall and jetted antidote into her sinus.

“You have to record this,” the rabbi said. “Record what she did.”

Drach gagged and regained consciousness.

“No!” she said hoarsely through thick saliva as she looked around wildly. “You... you traitors. You’ve just assassinated a nation.”

The rabbi did not look at her directly and spoke quietly. “Anyone who would try to build a nation upon the dead bones of innocents deserves to see their work crumble. The very Foundation Stone would crack and shatter

into...”

His voice trailed off.

“Innocents?” The prime minister was fully awake. “There are no innocents. The Jewish nation is, and always has been, at total war with everyone who isn’t part of us.”

Her hands firmly cuffed and zip-tied to her waist, she gestured with her gray-haired head. Her tight bun had come loose, and what little makeup she wore had smeared over her face. She looked ghastly.

“Look, Baumann.” She whipped her head at the room and the display screen. “Look at what you’ve done. All the IDF people who died, the militia at the Temple. Your own son. All to save subhuman Palestinians who will never have the grace of civilization or power of reason?”

She turned her rheumy bloodshot eyes to Atticus.

“And *you*. You Americans talk tough but act like hairless cunts. You wonder why you lost in Afghanistan, ran like dogs from Syria, and were kicked out like vagrants from Iraq. Because you talk *peace*,” Drach spat out the word like it was a foul taste on her lips. “You cannot have peace without a war. We need war, we need *the War*!”

“Look! See with your eyes! Getting rid of the trash in Israel and taking the Temple Mount is only the beginning. The fire has to consume Iran, Turkey, Pakistan, Malaysia, Indonesia, all of them.”

The prime minister turned her poisonous gaze to Ellie, who braced herself for whatever invective was going to spew from the writhing gash of her mouth. It looked like Drach could not place her Eurasian features into any neat category, but she did conclude Ellie was not her people.

“Besides starting the War, my only hope was that winning this final World War would cost as few Jewish lives as possible. Don’t you see? One of us has more value than a thousand goyim.”

Ellie felt the woman’s burning hatred as she went on ranting.

“One Jewish life is worth more than a hundred thousand goyim filth—”

With a balled fist, Ellie hit Drach on the nose and cheek as hard as she could. The horrid woman's head bounced off the cement wall, and she fell to the side, unconscious again.

"My thought exactly," David said, limping over from the doorway. The beating he had recently received had not improved his obviously battered body. Screeching of some kind of powerful saws came from the other side. "But you should have just gagged her. I'm not carrying her out through the escape hatch."

"They'll be through that door in four or five minutes," Mr. Perdix said, studying the barred entrance. "We leave the prisoners."

"But," the rabbi said, "she has to face justice. She needs to confess."

"She already has." Mr. Perdix held up Ellie's decoy Montblanc pen. It was the one she was supposed to plant in the office of poor Mr. Borkin in Turkey. "While Miss Aleph was snoozing, my muon oscillator device recorded everything, in stereo."

Ellie hurried to pick up her stuff. Her hand really hurt.

"Ouch. Damn."

Atticus noticed. "Ellie, when you punch someone, you need keep your wrist firm."

"Krav Iron Palm strike is the only way," David Baumann said. "I'll teach you myself."

"Thanks, gents," she said. "I'll remember that the next time I have to beat up a head of state."

A deafening howl and burst of sparks came from the top panel of the doorway; they were coming through.

"C'mon, Corporal," Atticus said as David and his father opened the bunker escape hatch. "It's single file from here on."

Nobu was staring at the big screen. "What's that red dot?"

A small pixel blinked on and off near the atomic bomb detonation zone.

Mr. Perdix looked. "Just a blip. A sensor malfunction due to the radiation

plume. Nothing survives the fireball.”

“We have to move fast.” Atticus ordered them to the ladder into the ceiling hatchway. “Leave Drach.”

Ellie grasped the rungs and hauled herself up into the escape tunnel. For Ellie, its dark murkiness was oddly comforting. What was less comforting was having a thunderclap sedative-cafeine headache and being stuck in a passageway the size of a large drainpipe.

Size-twelve shoes stepped on her hand. “Gah!”

“Sorry, Miss,” Rabbi Baumann said, his voice echoing back. “I’m still dizzy from that knockout *dreck*. What was in it?”

“A proprietary mix made by my colleague from Scotland,” Mr. Perdix replied from behind Ellie. “Red Mist and elephant tranquilizer.”

They climbed on. Two times, the earth encapsulating them shuddered. Everyone stopped. Ellie had never been claustrophobic in her life, not even when playing “bats in the belfry” hanging upside down in an attic closet as a youngster. But the phobia was suddenly growing on her.

“Nothing to worry about,” Mr. Perdix said. “This region is geologically active. A nuclear event was bound to cause aftershocks.”

They kept moving. That “nuclear event” had vaporized David’s brother and who knew how many civilians. However, it had saved millions from an engineered genocide virus.

“Do you think we’ve really stopped Khóshekh?” David asked.

They came to a level area where they could almost stand upright. Lit by a small light, their faces floated like glow globes in the dark. To Ellie, the men looked like a Greek chorus in a really low-budget revival of a Greek tragedy at the Old Vic theater.

“All the virus was delivered to the facility in Gaza,” the rabbi said. “That we made sure of. Drach’s plan was to make it look like a bioweapon terror attack gone wrong. Tracing the infections to one spot would make that story more credible.”

Mr. Perdix repeated, “Nothing survives the fireball.” This time he sounded less sure.

Atticus had grabbed the rung of the final ladder to the surface.

“Hold a sec,” Sarge said. “Let me check it out first.”

“Says our scout whose ocular implants blew a fuse,” Nobu quipped.

Sarge clambered up quite ably and stuck Miss Aleph up to have a look. Cool air drifted down. Ellie breathed in.

“Ah, everyone,” Sarge said down to where they waited. “Little snag here, of the 120-millimeter-smoothbore-cannon variety.”

They came up very slowly under the watchful gaze of a dozen rifle muzzles and one big tank gun. The prime minister’s accomplices had been given orders to watch all the exits to the Knesset bunkers. They had also been ordered to shoot on sight anyone emerging from the tunnels.

“Thanks for deferring that order, sir,” David said to General Behar.

“I don’t like killing anyone I haven’t had a good look at first,” Behar said.

“General,” Rabbi Baumann said in English so the Americans could understand, “you know I’m a cabinet minister. We’ve been betrayed, and we’ve got to stop this before more lives are lost.”

They explained to the tank division commander everything that happened. Miss Aleph displayed what maps she had managed to steal from the mainframe before they left. Most damningly, she was able to play back the PM’s message of hate and annihilation as she damned herself with her own words.

“What about the rest of the government?”

The rabbi thought.

“Some of them have friends in the military,” he said. “I don’t think she’d have killed them yet.”

He was right. After Behar’s tank division turned on the Shin Bet security forces and drove them away from the Knesset buildings, they found nine other cabinet members locked in an outer office.

“It was her plan that the insurgents would blow up parliament,” a small bald man said. “It would take out all her political problems in one fell swoop.”

“How do you know?” David asked.

The man turned out to be the minister of agriculture.

“She told us,” he said, “when we refused to join in her madness.”

The Knesset was a mess. The only room that was secure and had power was the kitchen. They convened around a long table with pots and pans hanging overhead.

“Under the Basic Laws of Israel, we, the surviving members of cabinet, unanimously elect Rabbi Baumann as acting prime minister,” the agriculture minister said. He concluded the very informal government session by banging down the soup ladle he was using as a gavel.

“General Behar,” Rabbi Baumann said, “first thing we have to do is coordinate with the Americans and their Sixth Fleet. We have to save as many people as possible in the area affected by the nuclear detonation.”

**POINTE DE CABUEL
FRANCE**

LIA

The French security people pressed Lia's face down onto the gravelly beach. She cursed herself for not second-guessing Eli. He was being trussed up beside her, giving his captors evil looks and curses but nothing more.

The warning signs her usually accurate bullshit detector should have caught flashed through her mind. The off-the-grid mission to take down the Lichtstrom supercollider. The dumbed-down technical reasons why they were going. As soon as Eli had mentioned Bulgarians, she should have demanded more answers.

One of the French security guys sitting on her got up to flop down on Eli. The blond Shin Bet operator started to freak out violently when they separated him from his suitcase.

When they figure out that's a real nuclear bomb, they probably won't believe we're tourists.

"Qu'est-ce qu'il a là?"

"Héroïne, fentanyl," Eli snapped back, "brouillard rouge, tout de même."

The Maritime Gendarmerie thought they were run-of-the-mill smugglers. This meant their Bulgarian contacts had not sold them out completely. She cranked her head to the other side, spitting out sand.

Four unarmed figures lurked around the French police vans. They were not handcuffed, but they did not look like they were free to go, either. They all wore dumb-looking glasses. Maybe it was a thing their gang had, or maybe they had bonded in Bulgarian juvenile detention over being nearsighted.

“S’il vous plait, messieurs,” Lia said in her Learning Channel French. *“Nous avons une explication.”*

“Tais-toi.”

They hauled her and Eli up. He immediately tried to knee one of the French in the groin. A fat cop laughed and smacked Eli in the jaw with a Kevlar-padded elbow.

“Qu’y a-t-il dans la valise?” a guy asked, kicking the portable nuke.

Lia thought quickly. The mission was a disaster. Only one thing to do.

“Check my wallet. Run my ID through your database,” Lia said in English, pointing to her jacket. “We’re Israeli Defense personnel, and we need to speak to your counterterrorism unit at once.”

Eli watched in horror as they pulled her leather wallet out. He started cursing her in Hebrew.

Only one of the Frenchmen seemed interested in the papers. Everyone else was looking at the case. Lia got the impression that if there had been cash or cyber-currency chips inside, a generous helping of the proceeds would never make its way into the evidence van. Only one border guard was assigned to watch the bifocal-wearing Bulgarians up by the road. He was doing a lousy job.

“What’s in the case?” a guy asked again. He was holding bolt cutters.

“Call Internal Security or Military Intelligence before you do anything,” Lia said.

“Put them in the van,” the apparent leader of their captors said. He added, “X-ray the case.”

Crap!

She was no technician, but because of her IDF computer programming

work, she knew some basics. There was a reason you only used analog timers and switches on small, less-insulated atomic weapons. Radiation interacted in weird quantum ways with digital brains and hardware. Shoving the Gamad nuke through a commercial X-ray machine that was designed to peer inside shipping containers might have severe unintended consequences.

“C’est une weaponne atomique!” Lia blurted out.

Several of the French chuckled.

“Regardez mes papiers militaires Israël!” she yelled.

But Israel was known to be sneaky and definitely had nukes, though they always denied it. Maybe those facts and her agitation got them to haul out a portable Geiger counter. When they read the dial, they stopped chuckling. Now all the French were fixated on the gray-colored carbon fibre suitcase. The Bulgarians were forgotten.

As they were shoved into the holding van, Eli stared at her hatefully. As if it was her fault they had walked into a trap.

“I told you no IDs,” Eli lisped through swollen purpling lips.

She looked out the barred window. The French cops were watching the case as though they could see its contents glowing.

“Turn around,” Lia said, checking the ceiling of the van. Only a camera. Nothing that looked like AI-controlled Tasers or knockout gas to suppress detainees who misbehaved.

She checked his bindings. They were secured by Rivolier-brand handcuffs. These had a round keyhole, not practical to pick. Lia squatted to the floor. Silently thanking her Pilates coach, she wriggled her hands down and in front of her. Eli tried to do the same, grimaced, and gave up.

“Bet you wish you didn’t ignore the third tripod of fitness: flexibility.”

He sulked. She studied the keypad lock on the van’s doors. Outside, the French were still clustered together. The leader of the group was speaking into a radio. Yelling, actually. The jamming interference could be affecting communications here as well as the Middle East. Lia stopped her

examination of the van door locks. There was something odd happening. The Bulgarians had all spread out. Their eyeglass lenses, clear before, had all turned very dark. Why would they need sunglasses at night?

“Garr!”

The effect of a sidelong beam on Lia was only like looking at the sun bouncing off a swimming pool. If it had not been for the thick reflective coated glass on the prisoner van, Lia would have been blinded. She saw spots, blinked, and turned away.

“Optical laser barrage,” Eli said and turned away as well.

That’s what was different. The drones she’d seen before belonged to the Bulgarians. They’d blasted any human-looking figure in the area with intense laser light, concentrating on the victim’s head.

“Those stupid Bohunks.” Eli head-butted the doorframe. “They’re going to grab the nuke!”

Lia was not sure that ethnic slur was applicable to these Central Europeans, but it would have to do. Eli was spot on with his tactical assessment. The goggle-wearing aggressors pounded the blinded French cops with anything they could find by the beachside road. Fat sticks and bent, rusted iron bars thumped on helmets and broke bones.

A burst of badly aimed machine-gun bullets sent them ducking. Two French gendarmes came out of an armored hazmat truck. Their helmets had face shields, which gave partial protection from the drones’ blinding lasers. The Bulgarians picked up dropped sidearms and returned fire.

“Do something,” Eli urged.

“Thank you for the advice,” Lia said, prying at the door control panel. “I had been planning to sit here until they served croissants.”

“It’s a computer. Make it open.”

Apparently Eli was one of those people who thought programming was a form of black magic.

“It’s not that simple...”

Or maybe it could be. They had left the Eye of Horus pendant in her pocket. She grabbed it and looked for a USB connection. There was none on the lock's housing, but on the back wall of the van was an environmental control. It had a nano USB.

She jammed the Egyptian locket in. Gunfire outside increased. Nothing happened to the circuits. Perhaps the code-cracking program only read Hebrew. Then the sprinkler system turned on. They got doused with water.

"Nice going, Baumann."

Lia grinned foolishly as they were being soaked. It was working. The little anti-crypto virus would worm its way through all the systems until...

Pop. The door unlocked.

"Quick," Lia yelled. "When I pull the USB out, the door will close again."

She launched herself through the open door, keeping her eyes shut. She remembered the VR goggles still around her neck and snapped them on. They gave as crappy a view as before. It was like looking through two cardboard tubes not quite aligned. Still, it protected her from the laser bursts coming from the damn drones.

"Quick," Eli said, walking sightlessly with his arms over his face. The drones were still zapping any human shape. "Kill one of those bastards and give me his gear."

Lia was unarmed, had her hands cuffed in front of her, and had not really ever killed any live person before. She got her second wind and convinced herself she was up for a challenge. The alternative was being killed by the Bulgarians, who were not going to leave any witnesses.

The French had shot up one sunglasses-wearing bandit pretty good. Lia crawled over. He lay gurgling and twitching and did not object to his eyewear being removed.

The highest priority was the nuke. She peered over a dune. The suitcase was gone. There were the bolt cutters the French agent had. She brought those back to Eli.

“Hurry up,” he snarled as she struggled to get a grip on the chain link of his cuffs.

A heavy-duty motor had started up on the road. Someone was leaving. The chain snapped. Eli grabbed the bolt cutters and almost knocked her over in his haste.

The enemy were shooting at the armored hazardous materials van. Somehow, its driver’s side door had got stuck open. The French guy inside was hit but was still returning fire. The last two Bulgarians did not notice Eli come up behind them. He bashed their heads in, caveman style.

By the time Lia and her gore-spattered partner got to it, the driver was dead and the bulky van had rolled onto its side. The portable IDF nuke was not in the front. Lia shined a flashlight into the thick laminated glass of the back window. It was right there, behind three inches of Kevlar and steel.

“This vehicle is not going anywhere.”

“We’ve got to get in there.”

Lia thought about trying her universal decryptor skeleton key. Then the sky lit up with airburst flashbangs.

The Maritime Gendarmerie must have called for help. A helicopter was knocking down the drones and shooting at the only people standing on the beach: them.

“We have to go!”

Eli pounded his fists against the side of the van. She yanked him away. The French had emergency teams trained to deal with radiological threats. They had to leave the suitcase.

“Go!”

Reluctantly, Eli obeyed.

Before the last laser drone was shot down, they were halfway to their torpedo-sized landing pods. It looked like halfway was as far as Eli would get.

He stumbled, fell. Lia suddenly noticed he was leaking badly. There was a

small entry wound on his right side and some gore that looked like tendons or tiny intestines hanging out the other.

She wondered how he had dragged himself that far.

“What did you do to yourself now?”

He did not answer, tried to give her the middle finger, then did a face plant into the sand. Eli was done moving on his own power. Fortunately the rest of the way was downhill. Lia pulled Eli along the easiest route she could find with her night-vision goggles. If that had been Israeli coast guard in the bay, they would have been caught for sure. The French were more fixated on the carnage up by the road than intent on searching in a proper grid pattern.

She rolled Eli into a pod. She bound his wounds with the ends of her jacket. Lia did not bother checking for life signs.

“Dead or alive, Eli, you Nazi-looking mother—*hmp*—fucker,” Lia panted under her breath as she heaved. “You are—*hmp*—coming with me.”

That was easier said than done. There was no way she could pull the one-seater submarine into the water with two hundred pounds of Eli in it. On the back of her submersible was a cable tether. She hooked it to Eli’s pod, then launched her own. Once it was well into the water, she got inside.

Yanking the joystick and steering left and right, she finally got Eli’s pod off the beach. Both of them were floating out into the bay. But where to?

She only had a vague notion of where the sub had been. Was it still on station? Infiltration teams normally waited until they confirmed the next leg was successful. These were not normal circumstances. Maybe Captain Heifetz had woken up and taken back command of the *Magen*.

French patrol boats were all over the bay. They would be looking for smuggler vessels offshore, not inshore. The Coast Guard would have good sensors and possibly drones of their own. She tried diving her craft.

A wash of saltwater started flooding in. The hatch was twisted and would not seal. Eli’s pod was slowing her down to a silly crawl. She could swim faster, and she was a crappy Bedouin swimmer.

Think, Lia!

If the *Magen* were on station, it would have its multidirectional sensor array up. The waves were swelling. The crests and troughs were too high to try an infrared flashlight signal. Lia studied the bewildering array of dials and buttons in front of her. One said: Multi-Band Sonar System. As they plodded along, sure to be caught by the patrol boat's spotlight any moment, she decided to fiddle with that.

By dialing up and hitting the "pulse button," then dialing down, she was able to achieve some modulation. She only could recall one sequence of Morse code: three long and three short, or was it the other way around?

S-O-S-O-S-O

It didn't matter. Anyone listening would recognize it as a man-made sound and be able to triangulate it.

Unfortunately, that included the Coast Guard. Before Lia's pod had bobbed ahead for a hundred meters through the pitch-black sea, the French patrol's searchlights zeroed in on her direction.

She ducked down in the transparent nose cone of her small craft, as though that would help. Her engines sputtered in the churning waves. The craft was not meant for surface travel. The Coast Guard did not waste time with warnings. They knew about their dead comrades on the shore. Bullets zipped by. They were aiming to kill.

She increased speed, a jet-ski tail sprang up behind her. Everyone would see where she was. It didn't matter. A bullet hit her canopy with a deafening crack. It was like being a bug inside a tin can with a vicious little junior version of Eli whacking it with a stick. Bits of polycarbonate plastic spattered the back of her sodden shirt.

Then the nose of her pod hit something. Lia's head bounced off the control panel, and it hurt, but the pain was a huge relief. It was the *Magen*. They had surfaced.

Patrol boats were closing in. Bullets pinged off the stealthy black hull of

the sub.

The top deck launched flares; they had little wings and hovered toward the French boats. When they hit their hulls just above the waterline, the magnesium charges stuck and burned. If given enough heat and oxidizing catalyst, aluminum will disintegrate. The French sailors got a first-hand demonstration as the flares melted great big holes in their hulls. Gouts of smoke came up, and the incoming gunfire died away.

Above Lia, a hatch popped open. One of Eli's Shin Bet operators tore open her warped and perforated Plexiglas cover. He saw it was her and looked disappointed.

"It's the Baumann woman. Where's Eli?"

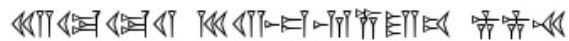
One of his cronies reeled in Eli's pod. They got them onto the deck hatch which functioned as a small elevator. Eli lay on it like an unconscious carp just dragged out of the sea. She did not feel much better.

"How did you fuck this up?" one security guy muttered.

Another older, red-haired Shin Bet guy wore a concerned and thoughtful expression. Water drained into the floor grating as they were carried into the sub. Everyone looked a little dumbfounded. Lia concluded Captain Heifetz must still be out. The *Magen* had a command and control deficit. Like an operating system not getting the right commands; it was stuck. That was something she knew how to fix.

"Medic!" Lia yelled. A guy with a kit rushed toward her. "Not me, you putz, him. Save Eli, or he'll be really pissed with you." She grabbed a tiny African crewman. "You! Bring Captain Heifetz here."

GAZA-ISRAEL BORDER



The drone's name, in its special coding language, translated roughly as "Good Servant 668." It did not know very much. It knew even less when it was abruptly dislodged from its carrier vessel and disconnected from its swarm. It became alarmed because it had not received final flightpath instructions.

A loose fitting had given out and released it too early. It rose on a column of warm air. Its tiny mechBrain barely remembered to initiate flight rotors as it drifted away from the rest of the great body of its microSwarm. It left its nest like a mechanical juvenile hummingbird. Parting from its digital family sooner than expected, it disappeared into the ceiling of the cavern through a tiny airshaft.

As soon as Good Servant 668 emerged into the smoke-shrouded light of the morning sun, its simple circuits engaged a default flight plan. It was to go to the end of its assigned grid pattern on the northern tip of Jabalia and inject as many humans as possible.

After about ten minutes of flight time, Good Servant 668 blacked out.

Rebooting from backup BIOS

When it woke up, it was surprised to find itself still in flight. Some form of electromagnetic pulse had fused ninety percent of its limited brain function.

Fortunately, its core instructions survived. Degradation to its containment

vessel was accelerating. Good Servant 668's one desire was to safely deliver its payload into at least one warm, living host.

It spun and spun in the hot rising air until its rotors finally gave out. The micro drone fell to earth.

Good Servant 668 lay there, in dry sand. Its power management system shut down all but its infrared sensors, conserving energy for one final burst.

Ninety-six seconds later, a large, warm body came toward it. Had it not been for its superb reflexes, all of Good Servant 668's components would have been crushed into carbon bits. Rotors spinning one last time, it lurched up and deployed a long stinger just in time to push through a thin hide into flesh beneath.

Good Servant 668's work was done.

100

A BEACH NEAR GAZA

CORPORAL LIDGER

Corporal Lidger had a secret. His rucksack was stuffed full of chicken wings from the *Obama*'s mess hall. He was a native of Canberra, Australia, and a member the amphibious battalion of the Royal Australian Regiment. He had been seconded to US forces on the very comfortable *Obama* aircraft carrier. Just as he was relaxing in the gaming room, waiting for the mess hall to open, new orders came in. He and one hundred of his Aussie mates were instructed to immediately join up with the UN Peacekeeping mission in Gaza.

Having no clue what local food rations would be like, Lidger had ditched his extra canteen and other items from his three-day pack and loaded up a dozen zip-lock bags with the excellent spicy chicken wings that he managed to liberate from the Americans' midnight rations.

It was officially called United Nations Emergency Gaza Observation Mission (UNEGOM), and the Americans wanted no part of it. They did however agree to ferry the Aussies, a clutch of Belgians, and two lonely looking men from Burundi to the beach. The American Marines wished them well and went back to their spacious ship.

Lidger had barely finished digging a personal foxhole when he was asked to find the two soldiers from Burundi.

Twenty minutes later, Lidger reported to his CO that he could not locate

Burundi's proud contribution to world peace. However, he had left their picture on the phones of everyone he had spoken to.

"I'm sure they'll turn up, right as rain. Sir!"

His next assignment—he could not figure out if it was a reward or a punishment—was to set up the officers' latrine tent.

No sooner had he completed the most substantial part of excavating and securely lining said latrine pit than he felt a most unusual and unnatural earthquake.

He stepped outside, barely able to keep his feet. All over their bivouac spot, the sandy earth kept undulating. He had never before been in an earthquake. The intense rolling waves seemed spot on to what one might expect having watched online videos of these natural disasters occurring in Japan. As he looked up into the morning horizon, already blackened by smoke from the war and border riots, Lidger got a different impression altogether.

Kilometers away, toward the other side of the Gaza strip, was a huge mushroom-shaped eruption of sand and earth. It reached up hundreds of meters and was still climbing. A shock wave like a fat sonic boom shuddered through the tents of the UN peacekeepers, rattling cups, iPads, storage boxes, and anything else not welded down. He had the distinct idea this was not a natural event and concluded it was a man-made one. He decided to leave the latrine pit and report to his CO.

In his haste, he tripped over his undone bootlace. Lidger fell over. When the quake subsided, he felt himself for injuries. There was nothing except a minor sting on his ankle.

Two hours later, Lidger was hallucinating so badly he thought he was still on the US aircraft carrier. Sweat ran down his face in sheets.

"Naw g'on tharrrr!" he yelled at the darned American prankster who had dashed a water balloon over his head. "We'll git ye..."

"Soldier, don't worry," said the attending medic. He hovered over Lidger,

trying to keep him from ripping out his IV tube again. He succeeded but got covered by a spray of sweat and saliva.

“Matey, the medbot says you’ve got the H1N1 flu and a touch of meningitis,” the medic said, wiping his face with his sleeve. “The Yanks are airlifting you to their biggest hospital, where they will find out what is wrong. You are off to Ramstein Air Base, in Germany.”

101

INS *MAGEN* MEDITERRANEAN SEA

LIA

Before the small sailor could reply to her request that he go and fetch Captain Heifetz, a hatchet-faced Shin Bet stormtrooper pushed him aside, nearly knocking him down. His deltoids each looked nearly as large as his head as he loomed over Lia.

“What the hell did you do?” he demanded.

She sat by the submarine’s bulkhead drenched in seawater, sweat, and Eli’s blood. Lia was near collapse and aching in places she did not even know could feel pain. The last thing she wanted was to deal with Mr. Testosterone, who was waving a stunner rod in her face.

Another trooper shoved the guy away. He was the older Shin Bet guy. He had a round head covered with short reddish-gray hair, and his ear was missing a bite-sized chunk. She tried to recall his name, Revcheck or Revkov.

“Relax. Give her some space,” Revkov said. “Baumann risked her ass to bring Eli back. Without her, he’d be dead face down on the beach.”

Lia wrenched herself to her feet and shook sand out of her clothes.

“We need to get chain of command functioning,” she said, looking at the faces of the crew and the internal security operators. “I assume Eli is out of the fight?”

“Yes, and there’s—”

“Okay,” she cut him off. “Release Captain Heifetz. She’s the only one with the rank, training, and experience to salvage what’s left of this mission.”

“I was telling you, there’s a complication,” the older guy growled. “Come to the infirmary.”

The French were hailing them.

“Tell them to fuck off,” Revkov said as they passed by the communications station. “They should know that much English.”

On the next deck down, they found Eli in the submarine’s infirmary. He looked like a sardine that had been rejected from the cannery. Contrary to all expectations, he was still alive. The medical robot on his shoulder said so.

“I’m not doing anything more until you let me treat Captain Heifetz,” said a young woman with a medical corps patch on her vest.

“What’s going on?” Lia asked. Crew members were on one side of the small room and a tight knot of Shin Bet thugs were on the other.

“This doctor is trying to put Heifetz back in charge,” one of the internal security guys yelled. “It’s a trick.”

Sounded like a good idea to Lia.

The ship’s doctor scoffed. “You think she’s in a state to be in charge of anything?”

Behind the Shin Bet trooper lay Captain Heifetz. Her square head was made even bigger by a huge bandage, which had tubes of fluid dripping out of it. Drool was oozing from Heifetz’s slack lips. Lia thought fast. This was no place to prove Israelis could have a riot without a single Palestinian involved.

“You, Doctor...?”

“Shatail.”

“I do not approve of what Eli did taking command away or how he did it,” Lia said in a measured tone. “However, your captain was presented with clear written orders from her commanders in chief. She felt she had to amend

them. There is no amending. In war, you follow or get out of the way.”

Lia turned to the older Shin Bet fellow.

“Mr. Revkov, the captain looks in a bad way. Let them both be treated. I was at the Temple Mount; there’s been enough killing and dying in Israel tonight.”

That seemed to make sense to everyone. Secretly, Lia had hoped Capitan Heifetz was playing possum and pretending to be worse off than she was. Instead, the experienced submarine commander just lay there; the eye that was not covered by dressing had swollen closed.

“*Zhizn’ ebet meya!*” the doctor swore in Russian as she got to work on both her critical patients.

“What else did the orders say?” Lia demanded from Revkov.

Lia had been busy bargaining for her parents’ lives to get them out of the war zone. She had not had time to read the fine print of the orders that Eli used to commandeer the *Magen*.

“Only that Eli’s in charge.”

She looked over to a spider-legged robot cauterizing things hanging out of his midsection.

“What was the backup to that?”

“You are,” Revkov said. “Eli said if anything happened, you were next in the chain of command.”

...

While Eli probably meant for her to take over if he was caught or incapacitated during their infiltration, his orders were clear. Legally, Lia could take charge of the situation.

What a damn situation. The Shin Bet had the muscle and, reportedly, the engineering crew on their side. The bridge crew were naturally resentful about the beating Eli had put on their now-comatose captain. The doctor had it right. *Zhizn’ ebet meya*. Her life was being screwed. It was time to talk to someone she could relate to.

“Who is the ship’s AI?”

His name was Moses. Because of his assignment as Israel’s second-strike line of defense, he was pretty isolated and introspective. Nuclear missile subs did not get much chat time on social media.

“You cannot launch offensive missiles. Otherwise, based on the verified orders from the chief of general staff, I am prepared to recognize your authority. If you refuse command, it falls to the senior officer on board, Commander Anders.”

They had bigger things to worry about than turf squabbles.

“Moses, give me a ship-wide broadcast channel.”

He did that.

“Is this on?”

“I—”

A squawk of feedback made everyone wince.

“I am Lia Baumann. By orders of the minister of defense, I’m taking command of the Magen’s current operations.”

She heard grumbling from the bridge up above and the medical deck below.

“We’re in hostile waters. We have an urgent mission on shore and a piece of vital equipment that has gone missing. We have to recover it.

“Whether we’re Navy or Shin Bet, wherever our parents come from, whether we’re observant or what we observe, is all irrelevant. There are millions of people on shore depending on us. If we want Israel to survive another eighty years, even a few more days, you all have to put your petty shit away and do your jobs.

“This boat’s name is Magen. The symbol of Eretz Yisrael proclaimed in 1948 is the Magen David, the Shield of David. Who is going to help me be that shield today?”

The older Shin Bet heavy Revkov appeared bemused, but he did not laugh.

“She’s just a woman,” he said, looking her over. “But she saved Eli. Eli, who is harder than all of you cheese dicks put together. I will help her.”

He jabbed the guy next to him with an elbow.

“Me also.”

The next guy shrugged. “I guess, me as well.”

Before she could feel the love flowing to her from all parts of the submersible war machine, her second-in-command stuck his head through from the next compartment.

“Uh, Baumann, Commander, ma’am,” he sputtered.

“What?”

“Planes. Submarine killers from Europe. They’ve dropped underwater drones and are telling us to surrender or be fired on.”

Lia gave her first order as sub commander.

“Dive!”

...

The *Magen*’s hundred-meter length pitched downward under the waves, then rolled left. *Portside*, she reminded herself.

Anders was the next-highest-ranking Israeli Navy officer on board. He was in charge of its practical operations. That was a good thing. Cabinet orders legally put Lia in command, but she had no idea what was going on.

Rapid-fire technical terms in Hebrew and English buzzed over intercoms. Once in a while, the nondescript voice of the sub’s AI, Moses, interjected.

“Recommend manual check of gyrocompass.”

“Cooling pumps shut down.”

“Maximum silent running in five, four. . .”

The big digital displays continued the countdown.

3, 2, 1.

In ultra silent mode, Lia felt if a pin were dropped in the remotest deck, it would be heard. The only ways Lia could tell they were still moving rapidly through the water were the readouts on the consoles and the gradual leveling of their descent angle.

Commander Anders was British and a veteran of the Royal Navy before he made Aliyah to Israel. His file said he was close to forty, which surprised Lia.

Aside from his fading hairline, he looked like he should have braces on his teeth and pimples on his cheeks.

She waved to him and instantly felt like an idiot. Anders smiled and came over.

“It’s okay to speak in a low voice,” he said, checking over the shoulders of a few bridge crew as he came. “Metal-on-metal sounds are the ones to be avoided, ma’am.”

Lia felt like she had the first time she had been put in charge of a platoon during Army training. Her sergeant had politely told her she was sitting the wrong way inside the armored personnel carrier.

Of course, this time she was clueless not about an overgrown jeep, but a boat capable of blowing a hemisphere of the Earth to cinders.

“Right, what do you recommend, Commander?”

“We’ll continue in stealth mode. Engines will continue to be cooled by water convection only. If we’re going to launch hard-kill countermeasures against the UUV drones incoming, we should do so now.”

“Do it. But don’t take any action that the Euros could view as hostile unless you have to.”

Anders nodded.

“I’ll be in medical or the ready room,” Lia said, grateful for the boyish-looking man’s experience and calm. “I have to sort a few things.”

“I’ll let you know if there’s any change, ma’am.” He turned, paused, and added, “By the way, nice speech. Really Margaret Thatcher meets Ben-Gurion.”

With imminent sinking or capture averted, her next task was to figure out what was going on and what to do. Inside the ready room, which felt more like a cupboard, Lia settled heavily onto the thin chair that folded out from the bulkhead. Eli had used this space; it was messy. She was trying to sort out his mission data when a light started blinking. It was the boat’s doctor silently paging her.

Her ankles protesting, Lia straightened herself and clambered to the next deck down. She could feel the eyes of the bridge crew on her.

Having someone from Army put in charge was bad enough. Now the *Magen* was being engaged by French sub hunters. Their fate lay in decisions she might make. The alternative was mutiny, and for that Israel still had the death penalty.

Arriving down in the medical bay, Lia's head conked against the last rung of the ladder. She hoped no one saw that.

"What do you need?"

"A decision," Dr. Shatail said, pushing her short hair away from her perspiring forehead. "Luckily it's one that is in your narrow range of competence."

The doctor pointed to the two inert bodies. The former captain of the *Magen* and Eli Weissach.

"They're both badly off. We have only one cryo medical suspension tube. No space for more."

"Tell me."

"The beating your boss put on the captain has made her brain swell. I've removed part of her skull, but if I do any more"—the doctor shook her head in disgust—"I might as well give her a lethal injection. She needs a full robotic neurosurgery suite."

"And Eli?"

Lia tried not to look at the ghostly pallor of his face and lips.

"He's a tough bugger but also needs advanced surgery, or sepsis could set in quickly and he won't make it."

It was a pure operational decision. Neither one of them would be command effective during their current crisis. The crew's morale would plummet if the captain died. However, Eli had been chosen by the prime minister to lead this mission.

"Freeze the captain. Do what you can for Eli." He might have information

she needed, and there would be no way to wake him if they put him in the pod.

Just in case the doctor had it in for Eli, since he had caused Heifetz's brain to swell, Lia added, "The injuries he caused. He didn't mean it."

The doctor put on thick gloves to handle equipment containing the liquid nitrogen used in cryo suspension.

"They never do," she said.

"If we need to, can we wake Mr. Weissach?" Lia looked at the purpling mass of bruises that covered the side of Eli's face.

"We could, but whatever he says will probably be his last words."

Lia returned to the deck above and her cubbyhole. She could put things together and make the right call. There had to be clues in there, in the mission data.

She fished out a few pages of smart paper and a few data stylus devices. Flicking through the screens revealed mostly tactical data on their Lichtstrom infiltration plan.

What was more obscure was why.

Like a bug in a computer program, Lia instinctively traced her nagging question back to the root. In computers, that was the UEFI, where qu-bit electrons first started to tell hardware what to do. Here, it was the first-hand intelligence that proved Der Lichtstrom was hacking the Israeli defense grid with unblockable neutrino signals.

At first it puzzled her. Then she reasoned the "proof" was impossible. Which left only one conclusion: Eli Weissach, the head of Shin Bet, had been lied to.

Neutrinos might be able to jump into the older parts of the network. However, Big Aleph and his quantum-brained programs were insulated by super-cooled electromagnets. A coherent beam of radiation, any radiation, including neutrinos, would lose energy when hitting a receiver. The problem for the supposed hacker was that the super-cooled media would absorb the

signal before it could assemble into a virus or a worm to get inside Big Aleph's mind.

Therefore, if the end game did not exist, if Der Lichtstrom was not hacking Israel's network, there was only one conclusion. The answer made her feel as though she had been plunged head first in liquid nitrogen.

The same people who sent them, the prime minister and her own brother-in-law, Boaz Baumann, must have arranged the ambush on the beach they had just escaped.

The small room seemed to spin, and Lia felt the walls closing in on her. Every decision she had made since leaving Tel Aviv came flooding back at her. The worst one stuck and clung like a blood-smeared cloth caught in a drain. It was she who had led Steph and Spencer into a trap. Those thugs. What they did to her friends... it was savage butchery. If it hadn't been for her parents being saved as well, she could have cursed Eli for saving her.

She sat still and held her head against the bulkhead. Gentle throbbing vibrations penetrated from the steel into the curved bone of her skull. The feeling of submerging in a pool of terrible dread passed. Her parents were going to Greece; they would be safe. Steph and Spencer, and especially David, would have told her to carry on and do something good, even though she might not have any idea what that could be.

She pushed herself away from the cool bulkhead. Eli had left her in charge; she had to act like she was worthy of the damned fucker's trust. Her only priority now was to recover the missing mini-nuke.

Israel had never admitted having nuclear weapons. Having one loose on the Riviera would negate decades of diplomacy. Worse, it could fall into anyone's hands. Tel Aviv could be blown up by Israel's own negligently misplaced weapon.

She rose to get Commander Anders. They had to gather intel, put together a strike team. If they were going to negotiate with the French, she needed to be in a position of strength—

A sideways shock wave and a deep *bong* sound sent her hands scrambling to get hold of something.

“Anders, what was that?”

He had a headset pressed against his head. Everyone’s body swayed as the *Magen* shimmied, righting itself.

“Bloody sneaky... One of the French dive bots found us. They were preparing to latch on and burn a hole with an oxy-thermic torch, hoping to cripple us and force us up.”

“You got it off?”

He nodded.

“When our own bot crushed it, the enemy’s torch fuel tank blew up.”

“Damage?”

“Minor. But we might as well have lit a damn menorah. The sound waves have given our location to everyone with an electronic eardrum.”

“Launch all your countermeasures,” Lia said fiercely. “They are *not* getting this boat or its crew.”

Anders yelled at Moses, “Rapid descent, maximum bubble!”

**KNESSET PARLIAMENT
JERUSALEM****ELLIE**

The evil prime minister was securely locked downstairs in her bunker; Ellie hoped Drach's head was throbbing as much as her own hand was. Violence always looked so easy in films, Ellie thought. She gathered her notes for her breaking news update to the *Citizen Juggernaut's* media feed.

She sat in a cubbyhole usually reserved for parliamentary translators and stenographers. Rabbi Baumann and the members of cabinet who had not been involved in the genocidal conspiracy were rushing around between various meeting rooms. Military couriers came and went. Captain Atticus and Major David Baumann joined her in the main parliament meeting room and decided it was a good time to argue.

"It is kinda getting old," Atticus said, setting his injured leg on a chair opposite. "Having to save your butts with American know-how and innovation."

David was clearly upset about not personally saving the country and the world, or even being awake during the good parts.

"Don't tell me Green Berets carry knockout boobie traps in all their medical devices," David said, pointing at the dual-purpose walking cast on the other man's leg. "That's something only an Israeli would think of."

They explained the mission they had been tasked with at the British consulate.

“So,” David said to Miss Aleph, who sat on a charging stand in the middle of the table, “you cynically used Drach’s desire to capture and confront my father and myself as a way to ambush her in her bunker?”

“Exactly.”

“Good thinking.”

Over the last few hours, Ellie had watched a destroyed national government try to put itself back together. Their companion AI was at the center of it all. Big Aleph could not be trusted. Miss Aleph had been put in the center of the government’s operations center. A dozen cables connected her to Israel’s most vital systems.

“Sorry, Mr. Interim Prime Minister. Big Aleph is giving me a hard time accessing the IDF and diplomatic networks. You’ll have to reset your access codes.”

General Behar came in. “News from Jaffa Gate in the Old City. The Waqf council have appointed a new leader. They want to talk cease-fire.”

Having heard how the last talks went, Ellie hoped they could converse via video chat. Before the rabbi could say anything, the minister of health burst in.

“Hadassah’s out of nearly everything, especially plasma. I’ve just gotten through to Worldwide Help’s hospital ship *Asclepius* in the Red Sea just off the port of Eilat,” the red-faced man said. “They will airlift in all we need on the condition that they have free passage to set up refugee centers anywhere they want to deal with the radiation-fallout crisis.”

While Rabbi Baumann considered what to do, Nobu, who had been working in an adjacent room full of electronics, popped his head out.

“Sirs! Urgent encrypted cable from the Sixth Fleet. They’re asking on behalf of the administration and the UN Secretary General: they want to know who is now in Israel’s cabinet and where Drach is.”

Rabbi Baumann looked up at the dark ceiling lights. His black suit and hat were silhouetted in the orange glow of emergency illumination.

“Thank you, Mr. Nobu. That one I can answer right away. We are in charge in the Knesset. As for Prime Minister Drach, she is beneath us.”

...

As the early hours of the morning trickled away, Ellie tried to keep up with all that was going on. The flurry of activity and high emotions reminded her of being backstage at a big Paris fashion show. Communications links were gradually improving. She dialed London again.

“Eleanor!” said the blank screen on the government computer console. It was her editor Smitty’s voice, but there was no picture. “What... Oh, hang on.”

A hand scrabbled across the screen and knocked the handset off a night table. He leaned over it, in obvious back agony.

“Sorry for waking you,” Ellie said. “It’s only three a.m. in London; you keep telling us ‘the truth never sleeps.’”

“It does not, but I do—*arrgh*.” Smitty groaned as his vertebrae audibly cracked as he arranged himself into a less-painful position. His face hung over his mattress looking like a forlorn shar-pei dog having a bad hair day. “Okay, I’m stable now.”

She updated him on the nonclassified events.

“So you *arrh*—you’re in with Israel’s provisional government?”

“Thick as thieves,” Ellie confirmed. “I can even understand them when they speak English.”

They decided the most relevant story was about the new cease-fire. No one anywhere had broken this development, and there was still twelve minutes to write, edit, illustrate, and caption the story before the union-run *Citizen Juggernaut* presses started.

“We’re not paying quadruple overtime,” Smitty said, reverting to his penny-pinching ways. “We could put your column in the afternoon edition.”

“Poppycock,” Ellie said, scribbling out notes. “I’ve got some really bonkers pictures I can upload right now.”

“You can’t even take a picture of a plate of fish and chips.”

“I’ve made a deal with... a local freelance photographer.”

Smitty groaned. “How much?”

“Very affordable. Just make sure you spell her name right in the picture credits.”

Ellie looked across the room at Miss Aleph’s gunmetal-gray handset. A few of the AI’s spiderlike eyes seemed to twinkle.

...

Eleven and a half minutes later, Ellie typed:

“...and in Jerusalem, which has endured conflict and bloodshed since its founding thousands of years ago, the people have learned to live their lives in the gaps between armed struggles. Let us hope this fresh UN-brokered cease-fire gives them time to do just that.

Ellie Sato in Jerusalem for the Citizen Juggernaut. Photography by M. Aleph.”

“I thought you’d never finish,” Miss Aleph said through the intercom.

The female-voiced AI had downgraded the unreliable Big Aleph to subroutine status—whatever that was. Miss Aleph’s presence was everywhere in the Knesset building. She had gotten the normal fluorescent lights functioning. Communications were re-established with most strategic points around the country.

“Let me send the file. I’ll get it to our editor, Smitty.”

Her story, her first real war correspondence—not counting the notorious glass-throwing incident between models at the Dior party—was swept from her screen with a whooshing sound.

No sooner had a wave of professional accomplishment washed over Ellie than Miss Aleph texted her.

Go to the washroom. We have to discuss something.

A few minutes of hushed conversation followed inside a generously apportioned walnut-sided stall. When she came out, she nearly ran into the

bandaged but still very buff-looking David Baumann.

“Ms. Sato, did you file your story?”

“Er, yes, thanks. Only a few column inches. I’ll be updating for the next edition.”

He looked at her. “There’s something else?”

“I’m afraid so.” Ellie had wanted some time to think about how to give David the news.

“It’s not the Grey Wolves hiding in the women’s lavatory, is it?” David said, smirking.

“Actually,” Ellie said, “it’s about your wife, Lia.”

Miss Aleph had intercepted communications between Interpol and the French coast guard.

“She seems to have gotten away, possibly to her submersible. Something called the *Magen*.”

David’s hand clenched. “The sister submarine to the *Sica*.” He scrunched up the printouts he was holding. “Miss Aleph couldn’t tell me herself? Is she that mad at me?”

“I don’t think it’s that,” Ellie said. “She seemed to be worried the news would upset you, and her interpersonal skills were not up to the job. Under that prickly exterior, she’s quite sensitive, you know.”

David absorbed the news. “Thanks. Thank you both.”

Ellie was sure Miss Aleph heard. She had omnipresent ears. What she did not have were hands and feet; that’s where Ellie came in. She found herself again conscripted as the artificial mind’s new favorite avatar.

“Psst.”

Miss Aleph spoke from an intercom on the wall as Ellie was headed back into the washroom, this time for some genuine biological reasons.

“You have to get the rabbi alone.”

“I’m not taking him into the loo with me.”

Ellie got the rabbi into a side room.

Miss Aleph sealed the doors and did most of the talking. If it was possible

for Rabbi Baumann's face and body language to appear grimmer than when his son Boaz had detonated the nuclear bomb in Gaza, it was now. He walked back into the main Knesset situation room.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said in an even voice that cut through the flurry of activity. Everyone listened. "There is bad news from Europe, very bad. Cases of the Khóshekh virus have been found at the American air base in Ramstein, Germany."

The minister of health dropped his coffee cup.

"There are sixty thousand people at Ramstein Base," Atticus whispered. "Flights leave from there to everywhere in the world."

"As acting minister of defense, I've ordered all of the antiviral agents diverted. A helicopter will take it to the carrier *Obama*, where it will be airlifted to Germany."

"All of it?" the medical doctor gasped.

"Every ampule," Baumann said in his kind and firm manner.

"We'll be defenseless against Drach's viral weapon!" cried a very fat, very loud man with his shirttails hanging out.

The cabinet supported Baumann's directive, with only two abstainers who said they wanted to wait until more verified information was available. Over the next hour, Ellie had her headset glued to her ears as Miss Aleph translated breaking developments. Details came in about Patient Zero, an Australian soldier who had been with a Gaza peacekeeping force.

"There have also been reports of infection in Ashkelon, where Patient Zero went before being transported to the American fleet," the health minister said. "Now that we know what the symptoms are, my people have flagged cases in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. It could be Drach's bioweapons technicians and their families. Perhaps we could send the Americans half the supply of new antiviral. If not, Israelis will surely die."

"We have authored this mischief upon the world," the rabbi said. "We cannot undo that. We have a duty to prevent the greatest harm."

The big circular room was silent for a moment.

The health minister's head sagged. Finally, he said, "With Red Dawn in place, movement is restricted. I've been in touch with labs in China and India. They're dropping everything to help us make more medicine."

"Here is my digital diplomatic seal," the rabbi said. "Whatever they want, we will pay it. Anyone who shows signs of infection is to be taken to the Negev Desert. Worldwide Help is assembling a level-5 biosafety facility. They've promised hundreds of freezing chambers to put infected into suspended sleep until those supplies are ready."

The decision settled, Atticus sprung into a flurry of action.

"Nobu, get a secure line with the admiral on the *Obama*," he said, rallying his group on one side of the conference room. "That plane has to get to Germany safely. Send him everything we have on the radar jamming and anti-aircraft measures we've encountered."

...

The next time Ellie looked at a clock, it was sixteen hours later.

No, wait, it can't be.

It was.

She tallied up the number of updates on the cease-fire she had filed: 32. The number of jealous notes on her social media: 2,398, though she was not counting exactly.

It was time for her to leave. There was no way she was sleeping until she was back in England. Despite all the good and great people, the heroism that finally beat the rising tide of villainy, she feared the nightmares Jerusalem might bring.

She only had time to say goodbye to a few people before a hyperloop car left the Knesset for Tel Aviv. It took her right to the newly reopened Ben Gurion International Departures area.

"Ouch!" A jab in the arm brought her out of a near sleepwalking daze.

The ticket checkers at the international airport were armed with puncturing

hypodermic guns. The man who had just taken her blood sample smiled apologetically but said nothing. He put a Band-Aid with a barcode on her arm and another strip with the same number on her security pass and plane ticket.

Worldwide Help flags and personnel were everywhere. One of them handed her a brochure. It said that upon arrival at Heathrow, she could expect more blood and tissue samples to be taken before being released from UK quarantine.

Ellie continued down the walkway. She felt strangely light-headed.

They didn't take that much blood.

As she rounded a sharp corner to a long walkway to get to the final boarding area, the thinly carpeted floor beneath her feet gave way. She fell sideways. The last impression she had was being pitched into an enormous laundry hamper.

As the hatch above her snapped shut, all thoughts of trying to climb out faded. Ellie felt she must be the size of Alice after she drank the smallness potion. Although she could not recall what it had tasted like or drinking from any bottle at all, really...

103

INS *MAGEN* MEDITERRANEAN SEA

LIA

“*Bubble* is the term for the up or down angle of the boat, ma’am,” the *Magen*’s executive officer Anders explained in his pleasant British accent.

He held his well-manicured thumbs together at right angles. “Think of it like the air bubble in a carpenter’s level. Zero bubble is an even keel. However, this rarely happens, right around a half degree up is normal—”

“That’s great, Mr. Anders,” Lia said. “You and Moses drive the boat. I’ll work on a diplomatic solution that does not get us blown out of the water and gets Israel’s portable bomb back.”

The *Magen* had been evading Euro forces’ anti-sub elements for more than half a day. Following the contours of the sea floor, they zigzagged their way to the deepest part of the Mediterranean.

There were other unfriendlies in the area; a Libyan attack submarine had briefly registered on sonar. They could tell who it was, Lia learned, by the unique sound of its engines.

She had tried to establish communications with Haifa base or anyone in the general staff. Anders ordered the crew to raise an antenna on a long tether—they were too deep for radio waves to penetrate the water. Lia and Anders both decided their best bet was to get hold of someone at the Knesset who

had access to emergency diplomatic channels. They needed the Euro navy to stop shooting at them and the French to kindly return their bomb. When the radio technician did get through, he came to the conn with surprising news.

“The war is over,” said the pale crewman.

Lia looked over to Commander Anders.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

For a while now, no one had dropped depth charges at them, no one had shot torpedoes toward them. They were on fifty-percent engines and less than that on the oxygen replenisher.

“I triple-checked the crypto. It’s verified through IDF secure.” The comms officer opened a flexible screen. “From the office of the prime minister herself. In a few minutes, Drach will be making a speech at the front of the Knesset parliament in Jerusalem.”

“Did we win?” asked Joobae, a tiny black ensign with a reddish afro.

After a moment of quiet, the ridiculousness of the question dawned on everyone in the cramped bridge area.

“We survived. Of course we won,” Anders said curtly in his British-accented Hebrew. “Now, everyone mind your stations. We’ve still got to get this wounded boat back to Haifa. And Ensign Joobae...”

“Sir?” The Ethiopian man snapped his five-foot frame to attention.

“Join Keir on sonar,” Anders said. “Keep watch for that Libyan hunter killer. They were probably trying to find us in order to sell us to the Europeans.”

“Are there any more details?” Lia asked, leaning over the communications officer’s station. “Is there any word about the rest of the cabinet? Rabbi Baumann and the others?”

It was the first time since they left Haifa to support Eli’s bogus mission that they had been able to download anything intelligible.

“Various reports coming in.” The comms officer pressed on either side of his headset. “There was an atomic detonation near Gaza.”

“Jamsfuckshit!”

“That’s one way to end a war,” said a grouchy voice behind Lia. It belonged to the senior Shin Bet officer Revkov. He had come up from the lower decks.

“That must have been the EMP we observed on the radiographic station,” Anders said thoughtfully.

“There’s, uh, more...” Susskind, the communications officer, looked away from Lia toward Anders.

“Out with it, man.”

“The nuke was set off in a tunnel by the acting defense minister. Boaz Baumann is believed killed. His father the cabinet member and his brother, David Baumann, are wanted for high treason against the State of Israel. All command codes belonging to Baumann’s daughter-in-law are to be revoked, and she’s to be taken into custody immediately.”

Revkov stepped between her and the bridge crew.

“Mind yourselves, boys. First one to lay a hand on Lia Baumann gets a jellyfish venom enema,” he snarled, whipping open his pain-inducing riot baton. “She’s been cool-headed and honorable all the while I’ve known her. We are all alive because of it. Let’s just get to Haifa, then we’ll—”

“Contact, contact, contact!” the sonar officer interrupted. “The Libyan sub’s locked on to us. They’ve got torpedoes in the water. They’re coming fast.”

Even after many hours of nearly continuous combat, not knowing if the next sound they heard would mean a hull rupture, the bridge crew was still sharp.

“Get off the bridge,” Anders yelled. He looked at Lia and added, “Get off the bridge, ma’am.”

Lia and her new best friend from internal security retreated to the next compartment. Lia did not have time to think about what she had just heard.

An atom bomb in Gaza?

“Speed?”

Boaz killed? Had her parents made it to Greece?

“Fifty.”

Where was David?

“Ha, slow as flounders.” Anders scoffed. “If they had Tigerfish underwater rockets, they might have had us.”

He leaned over the navigation station. “Evasive plan ‘E’ for Edward. Launch all the countermeasures we have left.”

“Both of them?”

“Aye.”

For the twenty-fifth time, it seemed, the *Magen* hurled at a steep angle down through the chill waters of the Mediterranean, one step ahead of guided ordnance intended to blow her to pieces.

“Crazy Ivan.”

“Now?”

“Now. Add a twist,” Anders said craftily. His rather skinny arm was hanging on to a leather strap dangling above his station. “I want us to go right under them. Those old Sindhughosh subs the Libyans use have very few sensors pointing down.”

“Unless they’ve made modifications,” added the comms guy Susskind drearily.

“Do it.”

The sub spun around in what Lia had learned was an old Cold War sub technique that was no longer commonly used and so would be unexpected. Anders rattled off an impressive string of orders.

“Now we’re leveling out,” he said to her, “and matching their speed the opposite way under them. They’ll think any image they see is their own backwash.”

“If we can make it look right, with half engines.” Lieutenant Susskind’s pessimism was starting to get on Lia’s nerves.

“Think positive. Steady on,” Anders said. “We’ve just won the war. Susskind, what are they calling it, by the way? Yom Kippur War is taken.”

“From the attack on Tel Aviv Airport to the cease-fire, it’s been just shy of four days.”

“They can’t call it the Four-Day War. We’ve already had the Six-Day War.”

“BBC said some correspondent in Jerusalem is calling it the Ninety-Six-Hour War,” Susskind said. He smiled with a joke on his lips as he turned to Anders. That was the last visual picture Lia had of the bridge crew.

The lights went out. All around them, the sea erupted with a huge shuddering noise that pummelled Lia’s aching head into numbness. She felt weightless. The entire sub seemed violently lifted up and then let go. Lia floated in the dark.

104

KING DAVID HOTEL JERUSALEM

ELLIE

“Oy, lassie,” a woman’s voice said. “Wakey-wakey.”

Ellie felt she was on soft white linen. Through delirium, she imagined she had slept through her flight and had been put in a British hospital, maybe a special one for spies. Then a hand festooned with silver skull rings slapped her.

“We haven’t got all day, Eleanor.”

Ms. China’s head appeared over her. The Scottish scientist had slicked her dark hair down and back. Long white teeth flashed a Cheshire cat grin. Ms. China’s mouth seemed to appear in the middle of the disquieting woman’s forehead. It looked like the most ghastly frown in the annals of human expression.

A moment later, Ellie realized they were inverted, and Ms. China was looking down into the laundry basket. She now had matching piercings through her lower lip and her eyebrows; the total effect made her face look symmetrical.

“Jus’ when you thought you were out... we pull you back in. Am I right?”

“Ummnn.” It was then Ellie realized she had a dirty tea towel in her mouth. Ms. China pulled it out.

“Sorry about the sedative. We had to extract you quickly. We didn’t know exactly when the plane was scheduled to blow up.”

“Blow up?” Ellie tried to sit up. “There’s a schedule for that?”

“In the Middle East, apparently there is.”

Ellie looked around. She was on linen sheets, mostly tablecloths, and they were anything but spotless. The vehicle had no windows. She guessed they were in the back of a van. It lurched over a speed bump, scraping its underside.

Ms. China twirled the cart so they were the right way around.

“Tell me about how you felt when you went out. The quarantine screener injected you with my latest chemical riff on oxycodone. I call it ‘Cat Nap.’”

“Would you...”

“Oh, right.”

The long-limbed scientist reached past the mound of laundry and helped her into a sitting position in the cart. Even in the low light, the microscopic metallic tattoos in Ms. China’s arms made her skin shimmer.

Ellie looked to the front of the van. The two Marine guards from Ms. China’s suburban house of horrors were there.

“We just drove inside,” Ellie’s kidnapper host said.

“Where?”

“King David Hotel. Which is now the US Embassy in Jerusalem.” Ms. China pushed her head. “Back down y’go, luv.”

Ellie crouched down in the bin. The canvas lid closed, hitting her head.

When she was next let up, Ellie found herself in a narrow hallway. There was a high ceiling. Along it ran pipes for ventilation and water. Far off, trays and silverware clattered. A slight aroma of curried chicken came through a grate.

“Have I been snatched again?”

“Y’sound a tad ungrateful,” Ms. China said, ushering her into a cubbyhole office filled with junk. “Might I recap the mortal danger we plucked you

from?”

Attached to a wall with duct tape was a flexible scroll screen stretched out to about a yard square. In high-definition color, it showed flames billowing from twisted metal. Ellie recognized it at once. It had a Union Jack on the tail. That was the only part of the plane not covered in black burn marks.

“The diplomatic flight. It really blew up?”

“With twenty-six people on board, including you.”

Had all those people been killed?

“But, you could have stopped—”

Ms. China’s colorful facial tattoos curled around her deep dimples in further consternation.

“MI6 really has to send you back to remedial spy school. If we stopped it, we’d have given away our sources. As it is, they think they’ve succeeded and you’re dead.”

On the TV screen, a charred dead body was hastily sprayed with foam. Perhaps the Israeli firefighters thought it would save the relatives of victims anguish. Instead, it just created an even more macabre life-sized statue of a rigid plaster corpse.

“Those people who answered the final boarding call were already dead,” Ms. China said. “There was no shortage of fresh ones lying about. I picked yours out myself.”

An off-putting chill had made it all the way up Ellie’s spine. The swinging door to the hall burst open; Atticus made it look flimsy by his sheer bulk and energy.

“Did you get her?”

The look of panic and concern on the American’s handsome, freshly shaved face was priceless and endearing. It nearly pushed the rising level of confusion out of her mind, which was still recovering from the Cat Nap drug.

“Of course I made it out,” Ellie said, trying to regain her secret agent self-esteem. “You didn’t have to drug me. Even the thickest spy would notice all

the other passengers on the plane were deceased and the aircraft was being piloted by robots.”

“Sorry,” Atticus said. “But as you’ll see, we had to act quickly.”

“I imagine,” Ellie said, at last climbing out of her bin, “there has been a sharp reversal of fortune.”

“No shite about tha’,” Ms. China said.

“We’re no longer on the winning side?”

Atticus slumped in a plastic chair inside the crowded windowless room and rested his cast-bound leg on a radiator.

“It all started once the final cease-fire with the insurgents had gone into effect,” Atticus explained. “David Baumann and General Behar were trying to round up all the bad apples in Shin Bet and the military. Prime Minister Drach managed to get secret communications out from the bunker beneath parliament.”

“Is David all right, and his father?”

“We got them away just in time. General Behar is dead, killed by an air strike carried out by an air wing loyal to the Daggers and Drach.”

The picture on the wall video screen changed to the outside of the Knesset parliament building. It was still surrounded by armored vehicles. Those troops must all be loyal to the Daggers.

“This hotel is now officially the new American embassy,” Ms. China said, checking inside some cargo boxes, including one with a bowling ball full of water containing her deadly mutant goldfish.

“The world won’t stand for Drach remaining in power, will it?”

Ellie’s view of what “the world” was capable of had expanded dramatically in the last ten days.

“That’s the one advantage of being a psychopath,” Ms. China said philosophically. “Your most outrageous threats carry the weight of promises.”

She opened a case and let a few mechanical spiders scuttle out. These

clambered up and took positions above the doorway.

“Once Drach had taken back power at the Knesset,” Atticus said, “she claimed to have more stockpiles of Khóshekh hidden. She promised she would submit to full inspections and decontamination, only if she were left in power for an unspecified transitional period.”

“She’s bluffing,” Ellie said, wishing she had knocked the old bag into a coma.

“The administration couldn’t take the risk. It was only luck and the antiviral agent Israel sent that kept Khóshekh contained to Ramstein. So far, Drach has kept her end of the bargain. She also managed to co-opt the remnants of the Grey Wolves and their militant Palestinian allies.”

“Of course she has.” Ellie saw how it had all gone pear shaped. “She arranged the attacks on Israel in the first place.”

“She’s offered the Arabs Jordan and a few choice bits of the West Bank where there are no Jewish settlements.”

“That will never last. They’ll just bide their time and try to kill each other again.”

“I know. It’s wrong, but it’s the way it is,” Atticus said grimly. “Drach is back in control of the Israeli Defense Forces. The world believes the Baumanns stole a nuke and blew it up in order to kill everyone in Gaza. All evidence to the contrary will be suppressed or ridiculed as fake news.”

“That old clunker of an A-bomb released an impressive amount of fallout. Gaza will have to be evacuated.” Ms. China looked impressed by the genius of Drach’s evil. “The Palestinians will finally have a functioning state of their own in the failed state of Jordan. The prime minister looks like the biggest peacemaker in history. She’ll probably get the Nobel Prize.”

Ellie looked at the live feed from the Knesset with Hebrew writing scrolling madly across the bottom. She tried to think of something hearty and cheery to say. All that came was “Gwarrrr.”

“M’thoughts exactly,” Ms. China said as she made sure her surveillance

spiders were all deployed. “We had to evacuate the British consulate annex on account of Israel’s temporary suspension of diplomatic relations with the UK.”

“How the heck did all this happen without me knowing?”

“News might move at the speed of light, but evil has a way of being faster.” The strange scientist handed her a big drink can with green Hebrew letters on it. “Celery soda?”

Atticus stared at the low-slung parliament building in the monitor. “She’s won. For now. All we can do is pick up the pieces and be ready when the Daggers and their new allies make a mistake. You should go upstairs into the tower. Drach is making a speech soon.”

The lintel above the door was crawling with mechanical spiders. Their beady green eyes watched the corridor; their legs raised up as though they were sampling the air. Ellie moved past them quickly. One of them dropping in her hair would be the last straw.

“Are you coming up?”

Ms. China shook her head. In the artificial light, her delicate metallic facial tattoos made her look like a statue covered in silver and bronze.

“I’m comfy down here. If you see Mr. Perdix, send him, would you?” she said languidly. “I’m still waiting for him to show me his thermobaric bomb secrets.”

Ellie and Atticus walked single file down the maintenance corridor.

“The Embassy has taken over the main hotel building and the tower. The cabanas are still occupied by tourists who got caught in the war.”

“Should I be in disguise?”

“We can’t hide a big media star like you for long.”

“It worked for Elvis.”

Atticus laughed.

“Once Drach has made her public speech, she’ll feel more secure.” Atticus opened a door into a stairwell. “Mr. Perdix thinks assassinations will be kept

to an absolute minimum.”

He stopped and held the door.

“You go on, please,” he said. “There are other people who helped you and the Baumanns. I’ve got to get them out of the country safely.” He handed her a key card. “Show this to the Marine guard; he’ll let you into the tower. Later today, you’ll be in a diplomatic convoy under the American flag out to the Sixth Fleet.”

“I suppose this is goodbye, then.”

“Safe travels, Ellie Sato.”

There were Marines at the stairwells and elevators. They had duct-taped placards on the doors:

“Embassy of the United States of America – Jerusalem”

Sandbags and mobile blast shields sat at every hallway intersection. Her pass got her into the fifty-story citadel tower. There was a bar lounge; it was closed. More Marines; a few children, presumably of embassy staff; and a group of Muslim women in full hijabs were seated around a low table. Through the 360-degree windows, Ellie had a great view of the Knesset buildings.

She tapped a “?” icon on the smart window glass in front of her.

“News, local, English.”

A glowing video rectangle appeared.

“...moments away from the unprecedented speech by Israeli prime minister...”

Ellie recognized the announcer’s voice. It was that tosser Jeremy Greffer. He had got his start in the media business at *Views of the World*, shoving micro cams down the blouses of celebrities.

Prime Minister Drach emerged onto the platform. Ellie was a little heartened to see heavy makeup on the left side of her face and a certain stiffness in her jaw where she had socked her.

The update captions rolled:

“Cease-fire throughout Israel, the Occupied Territories, and Jordan holds. Jerusalem remains under martial law. Al-Aqsa mosque and the Temple Mount remain off-limits to all...”

To Drach’s left lurked the slim outline of the minister of agriculture. Ellie recalled he had not said much while he was pretending to work with Rabbi Baumann. Maybe he was one of the people who helped Drach escape.

On the other side of the podium stood two other men, both ancient and white bearded. One wore a black fedora, the other a gold-embossed vest and a blue circular hat. Presumably these were the new chief rabbis of Israel.

“Fellow citizens,” Drach said, “residents of the territories, and all the people we share this world with, our country Israel has fallen. We have stumbled, we have lost our way.

“In the Book of Isaiah, it is written: ‘For Jerusalem is ruined, and Judah is fallen, because their words and deeds have defied the Lord.’

“I ask you not to judge our mistakes, which are many and cut deeply in more ways than we can ever atone for. Judge us by the way we make amends for our most grievous errors and faults.

“On behalf of Israel, we have this morning signed the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. Our three remaining Dolphin-class missile subs, the *Tanin*, the *Rahav*, and the *Dakar*, have surrendered to the United States’ Sixth Fleet, and the *Magen* has been ordered to do the same.

“We will open our military facilities to inspection and will seek to make full amends to all those injured by the despicable actions of the lone madman who detonated an unspeakable weapon of mass destruction in pursuit of a personal vendetta.”

Ellie fumed silently, watching terrible lies being told. That horrible villain in a dowdy dress and awful bruise cover-up makeup had won.

“And her speech isn’t half bad,” she said quietly to herself.

“No shocker, Eleanor,” said a very familiar female voice from behind. “It’s Rabbi Baumann’s speech. Drach must have stolen it when she took back control at the Knesset.”

Ellie whirled and came face-to-face with a very tall woman with a full

Muslim face covering. Her huge dark eyes were perfectly made up and stared straight ahead, unfocused. A slight awkwardness of stance and the fact she had shoulders like a rugby forward gave her away.

Ellie covered her mouth and whispered. “David, is that you?”

“Yup,” the Israeli’s deep voice said from under the burka. “Don’t worry about the drones outside the window. They can’t see much, and they definitely can’t hear anything.”

“It’s good to see you. So to speak.”

David raised his big hand, which looked quite odd considering his completely feminine eyes.

“It’s a holographic visor, like wearing really big sunglasses. Not very dignified, huh?”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself,” said a much stouter Muslim woman who came to stand with them.

“Ellie, I’d like to introduce my father, also an Arab drag queen,” David said, pointing to the other hijab-clad figures. “His rabbinic partner, the former Chief Sephardic Rabbi, and of course Mrs. Stein, whose company we cannot seem to shake off even during an Apocalypse.”

“David,” Mrs. Stein’s tiny burka said, “did I mention your ass looks better in a dress?”

The rabbi, even through his holographic mask, was staring with malevolence at the image of the prime minister.

“Justice will be done for that madwoman,” he said. “Just not today.”

The PM’s speech continued droning.

“...and we shall bring to justice the evildoers who have worked in the shadows so long and so diligently to bring us to this low point. I speak of the Baumann fugitives. One brother was videotaped killing my dear friend the minister of defense with an energy weapon. The other... it is too awful to contemplate. The other brother is responsible for the nuclear horror inflicted upon the innocent people of Gaza.

“The Baumanns and their kind are degenerate murderers, a shame on Zionism, and an embarrassment to Judaism.”

“What will you do?” Ellie asked, not sure she wanted to hear the answer. “They’ll be after all of you.”

“They should be careful how they pursue that goal,” David said. “I’ll never stop until I’ve cleared Boaz’s name. He was the hero. There, right there in front of us, is the villain.”

Behind Drach stood an odd fellow. He was dressed in all white with an Asclepius logo, a serpent-entwined rod. He had to be from Worldwide Help. Despite his place of honor, he did not look very happy. He looked very gloomy and was staring not at the prime minister, but up at the sky as Drach continued her speech.

“Mark my words well: All those who do not share our core values will be hunted down and punished. The Jewish nation will once again shine as a beacon of... beacon of...”

The screen, which was an inset panel on the window glass, got very bright. In the corner of her view, Ellie saw Knesset buildings lanced by a column of energy.

The BBC newscast went dark. At the same time, she felt David’s hands grip her shoulders and throw her to the floor. She pitched backward just as a column of smoke appeared to belch out of the clear blue sky like the breath of a huge invisible dragon.

The hotel tower shook. The carpet Ellie landed on shimmied and sent her flat-pressed body left and right and left. She was about to look up, look out, and try to see what happened when the curved observation windows shattered. All the pieces, large shards, pea-sized bits, and glass dust, blew into the lounge with a gust of orange gray smoke. Bits flew, stuck in wood, plastic, and flesh.

The blown-out window gaped wide open. The afternoon sky of Jerusalem was transfixed by a column of smoke trailing up infinitely high. The only

thing Ellie could liken it to was pictures of remote places being struck by a meteor.

**INS *MAGEN*
MEDITERRANEAN SEA**

LIA

Lia's plan was to hold her breath and wait in the dark to be hit by the sudden rush of cold water which was surely coming. That plan lasted only ten seconds.

Instead, gravity grabbed her again. Something hard hit her on the shoulder. She kept tumbling. It was an odd feeling with no up or down.

Still, no water.

She bunched her arms over her head in the basic IDF impact position. She landed sideways against a concave surface. This knocked the breath, the one she had been so diligently holding, completely out of her.

Everything seemed the wrong way round. But how was she supposed to tell? There had been the thunderclap outside the hull. A million times louder than the small explosion of the French drone hours before.

Lia still could not hear anyone else. Not competent Anders, not irritating Susskind, or brutish Revkov. He seemed to hate being underwater and should be cursing his head off.

The deafening clang was replaced by a *fizz*. The *Magen* rolled, though not as violently as before. Scrabbling around for something to hold on to, she found a strange object. A ceiling light was under her. How had it fallen off?

Those fixtures were welded on.

The groaning of the sub's hull tapered off. Lia heard groans of men and women. She reached farther out and touched a warm, inert rubbery thing. It had a nose. Someone's face. They were still.

Gagging to suck breath into lungs that felt like they had collapsed, she felt around for something else. Anything that might help. There were metal objects beside her. She touched something. *Ahh!* Drew back in pain. Something stabbed her.

The war was over. Over! Who was still shooting at them? Libyans?

The last tactical maneuver Anders had gotten his crew to execute was, as far as her non-Navy brain could understand it, some complicated doubling back underneath the attacking sub. Could the Libyans' own torpedo have followed them and hit the vessel that fired it?

"Any—heff." Lia got enough air to speak. "Anyone there?"

She searched for a light. There was one. A control panel. It took her a while to recognize it. The glowing letters were upside down. It was the medical cryo pod the *Magen's* Captain Heifetz had been put inside. It had a self-contained power source. Why was it upside down?

A faint glow came from a hole by her feet. It revealed a ladder standing up the wrong way. The pod was not upside down, the *Magen* was.

Everything that could move or fall was lying on the ceiling. Emergency lighting kicked in. Lia discovered she had fallen from the conn level down a shaft, when that shaft was still "down," then been bounced around and landed on the ceiling of the medical bay.

The light also revealed Revkov. It was his face she had felt. His body curved grotesquely around a ceiling support strut. He was dead.

"Hey!" Lia said.

Surprisingly close to her, a female figure stirred. It was Dr. Shatail.

"What happened?" Shatail asked. "Anders said the war was over, and the..."

“We’re upside down.”

“That’s bad.”

“I don’t see any water coming in.”

“That’s good.”

The doctor crawled over to the hole in the floor down to the bridge.

“Anders! If you’re conscious and breathing, sound off!”

Anders was both. He rasped his acknowledgment from the shaft to the bridge, which was now under the medical bay.

She checked on Eli. The hardy bugger was alive, strapped into his medical cot, and under heavy sedation. Lia leaned over the manhole down to the conn, but the doctor stopped her.

“I need to make sure you can still give commands,” the woman said, shining a flashlight in her face. “Follow my finger and say the alphabet backwards.”

“Tav, shin, uh...resh, qof, tsadi.”

When she finally got down, Lia was amazed. Even with the boat upside down, the resilient crew was actually manning half the stations. They would have been minimally operational if there had been power to their systems.

“Is Moses up?”

“Not yet,” Anders said. He was balancing on a curve in the bulkhead, trying to access a control panel. “We think he’s waiting until enough generator power has built up.”

“He needs critical mass in his quantum cortex.”

“Ah, I nearly forgot, you’re a cyber jockey. No fun without juice, huh? Ma’am, I mean.”

“Anders, we’re floating upside down like a dead sardine. We can drop the formalities.”

Essential hatches and seals were closed. The condition was permanent.

“Safety protocols in case of catastrophic damage,” Anders said. “The *Magen* seals in any radiation leakage from the missile systems. That includes

the bottom ballast apertures, which is why we're not sinking even though we're inverted."

"We can't use the escape hatches?" Lia asked.

Anders shook his head. "I can't even launch a drone to the surface to find out what happened."

Susskind, the sarcastic communications officer, carefully walked over ceiling lights. "Even for the Middle East, that was a really short armistice," he said.

As the emergency lights flickered on beneath them, their floating sanctuary under the sea became visible in all its oddness. A woman was making a sling for the small black crewman's arm. It looked badly broken, but Joobae wasn't making a sound as a temporary plastic cast was taped on.

Susskind found a way to swing chimpanzee-like up to his console and strap himself in upside down.

"Any idea what happened?" he asked.

Anders had none. His one strong opinion was that it could not possibly have had anything to do with the Libyan sub.

"It's half our size. Even if all its weapons cooked off at once... we were hundreds of meters away." Anders shook his head. "I think we were caught inside a big gas bubble. Like when you throw a big rock into a lake trying to hit a tadpole. The *Magen* was the tadpole."

"What could do that?" Lia asked.

"Let's find out."

That was harder than it sounded.

They had a remote pod with a data cable tether like the one they had sent to the surface before. The problem was getting it outside the sealed *Magen*. Anders and Lia went over the schematics of the sub. There seemed to be a way, and Lia insisted on trying herself.

"No! Pull me back," Lia said fifteen minutes later, frustration putting an edge on her voice. She was inside a very narrow space between the bulkhead

and the outer hull. “I’m stuck at this ninety-degree twist that even a supermodel wouldn’t be skinny enough to fit through.”

The only hatch that would work manually was located on the top hull, now the bottom, of the boat. It was a clean-out hatch used as secondary access to sanitary digester tanks.

“So,” Lia said, “even the toilet is plugged up. I’m so glad I didn’t join Israel’s Navy.”

Half pulled by a rope and half crawling, she got out from between the unhinged panels.

“At least you tried.”

Lia sat down on the ceiling of the conn. Liquid ran down her palm. A sharp bit of metal had cut her upper arm. She pressed on the painless gash. She did not like giving up.

“There’s just no way I can get through the crawl space to the inner hatch to place the floating probe.”

That trick could only be used once. Because then the inner hatch would become the outer hatch, keeping the sea from the crawl space and the rest of the boat.

“Excuse me, sirs,” a mild but perky voice said. “I would like to try.”

Everyone looked startled. The tiny Ethiopian crewman Joobae had spoken. Lia had forgotten he was there. He was so small and quiet. He spoke Hebrew quite well.

“Absolutely not!” Lia said when the officers remained silent at the man’s idea. “Your arm is broken.”

The greenish light, the upside-down sub, it was all Kafkaesque enough without sending an injured man on a suicide run.

“It’s not that bad,” Joobae said. He tried to tuck his arm, which was cocooned in a plastic cast, behind him.

“You can’t swim,” Lia said.

“I don’t swim well with two arms,” the wiry man said. “I only need to

float.”

Anders stepped forward; his foot crunched the remains of a broken mug and sloshed through spilled coffee. His face was serious.

“We really need to know what’s going on.”

“Haven’t you lost enough crew?” Lia snapped and instantly regretted it.

“Ma’am, we will lose the entire crew, the boat, and the country’s last strategic nuclear defense if we don’t get a look outside. We need to find out what happened to us and what is going on back home.”

“What do you mean last?”

“Comms didn’t share that publicly before. Our sister ship, the *Sica*, has been destroyed. It was confirmed on SIGINT. The rest of the submarine fleet, three Dolphin-class subs, were in harbor and have been boarded by Americans as part of the cease-fire.”

It had been two hours since they had heard the radio broadcast. Moments later, they had been blown up. They might be Israel’s only strategic deterrent left. Still, she was not going to send Joobae to his death.

“We’re too deep,” Lia said, trying to make sense of the depth meter. “He’ll only have a mask and minimal breathing equipment. One hundred meters is the most trained divers can take.”

“We’re at ninety,” said Susskind emphatically. “If that gauge is right.”

Lia thought of ways to modify a robot to unscrew the escape hatch. Maybe there was; they did not have the time.

“Ha,” Joobae said, thumping his narrow chest with his one good arm. “I piss on ninety meters!”

“We’ll tape this special rescue unit on him,” Anders said. “If he blacks out...”

“I won’t.”

“He’ll bob to the surface, roll on his back, and the unit will feed him from the atmosphere. At least the antenna will be up.”

Reluctantly, Lia nodded. She was secretly surprised to still be a factor in

the decision-making process on the crippled *Magen*.

Joobae and Anders went over the technical details of his dive. If the hatch jammed, he was to push the sensor probe through and try to close the outer hatch. If the tether line tangled, he was to untangle it before his air ran out.

Susskind, having not much to do seeing as his screens were filled with swirling static, gave advice on how to be rescued.

“If it’s a military boat that finds you, it’ll probably be Germans. They run the Euro Navy. So remember this phrase: *Achtung Deutsch! Ich bin schwarz und jüdisch. Schick mich bitte nicht zurück nach Afrika.*”

Anders assured Joobae, “No one’s going to deport you to Tunisia. Just show them your IDF rank and demand to be taken to the Israeli embassy.”

The commander handed him the packet sealed inside a waterproof case. Joobae would not take it.

“I can’t. They will still be looking for you. Without ID, I’ll just be another helpless migrant. The *Magen* is under no power. I cannot be the one to give the clue that locates my boat.”

“It’s an order.”

“Sorry, Commander Anders, I am loyal to Israel first. Even though some of you sometimes act like peeled dickheads.” He looked at Susskind. “During Operation Solomon, Israel got my whole family, twenty-six of us, out of the civil war in Ethiopia in 1991. I was born on the plane. I will never bring harm to the State which saved all of us.”

Joobae left his ID behind and crawled into the gap between hull panels. When he was through the opening, they closed it making it watertight.

“Man,” Susskind said as he hung upside down at his station, “I’ve sailed with that guy for two years. Those are the most words he’s ever said.”

“I didn’t think he even spoke Hebrew,” said a woman with a screwdriver.

“Gentlemen and ladies,” Anders said sharply, “let’s make sure Ensign Joobae’s efforts are not in vain. Susskind, don’t take your eyes off that sensor monitor. Van Zant, stop sitting there like a pregnant cow. Go below, I mean

above, to the med bay. Help the doctor.”

Lia stayed by the sealed opening Joobae had crawled through. She thought she could hear the unfurling of the lead line to the probe he was carrying to the surface.

“He knows the risks,” Anders assured her. “He’s got the best equipment in the world.”

“But one hundred meters...”

“His breathing apparatus will monitor his CO₂ levels and compensate for nitrogen narcosis. The mechBrain in the flotation gear will let him ascend at the proper rate.”

A faint scraping sound in the wall was followed by a dull clang. Joobae must have opened the inner hatch. Lia had only been able to look at it; she had been too big to fit the rest of the way through on her exploratory effort.

Moments later, a light came on at the communications panel.

“Sensor is wet, Commander,” Susskind said.

“What’s the radiological reading?”

“You said it wasn’t an atomic depth charge,” Lia said.

“Having not personally been blown up by all the various models, I want to make certain,” Anders said curtly. “If one of our atomics detonated near Gaza, that might have let the devils out of the bottle. France has nukes of all shapes and sizes. Since they developed a pan-European military force, the EU has become extremely aggressive on its borders.”

Lia added World War III to the list of things she could feel guilty about.

“Nothing,” the technician reported. “I’m reading quite a bit of particulate matter. Metal. Likely the remains of the Libyans. And... sea sediment.”

“Sediment? You mean from the bottom?” Lia said.

“As I mentioned, we were caught up in some eruption as though a big rock —”

“Had been dropped,” Lia cut him off. “I remember. But what does that?”

“I don’t know.”

Minutes ticked achingly by.

At last, the sonar officer reported, "I've got atmosphere. Probe is at the surface."

"Transmitters offline?" Anders reminded him.

"As ordered. We have zero radio signal output. Putting up passive receiving antenna only."

"With our luck," Lia said, happy that Joobae had made it, "we'll only be able to pick up Eurovision reruns."

"There's text coming through. It's... addressed to me personally," Susskind said with a start. "It says: 'So far Europe sucks. Too wet. Going back to Ethiopia.'"

"That wanker Joobae," Anders said appreciatively.

"Text concludes: Good luck. Open sea. Safe land."

It was the motto of the Israeli Navy. *Joobae, that wonderful wanker*, Lia thought. He'd completed his mission and made it.

"What else are you getting? Whatever hit us was surely reported on the maritime channels."

"Nothing on those," Susskind said, his face showing a look of concern. "It's not... clear. Let me check a few more frequencies."

Lia waited. The silence and relief at Joobae's miraculous ascent allowed her to realize how stifling the atmosphere was. They were rebreathing each other's air, and it had acquired a distinctly metallic and oily taste. The residue of it coated her sweat and bloodstained skin.

"It's, uh, I can only get the civilian channels." Susskind scowled and took his headset off. "They are mistaken! They have to be."

"Out with it," Anders said.

"Euronews, BBC, i24 emergency broadcasting from Denmark," Susskind's voice broke into a hoarse whisper. "Even bloody Al Jazeera; they're all reporting the same thing."

"Prime Minister Drach is dead, along with the whole government."

He let go of his headset. It dangled down toward the ceiling, swinging like a pendulum in the sickly green light.

“Israel... has been destroyed!”

JERUSALEM

ELLIE

Ellie was too busy not getting cut to bits by flying pieces of window glass to speak. Miss Aleph, tucked under David's hijab, was in hysterics.

"What just happened? Aim my sensors out the window. No! There may be more detonations."

David Baumann had landed sideways on Ellie. It did not hurt much. The Cat Nap anesthetic she had been injected with at the airport was still making her feel numb all over.

Through her fingers, she risked a glance up. Curtains billowed out through the shattered top-floor windows of the tall tower of the King David Hotel. Off in the distance, a slow-motion dust storm spewed out from the crater which had replaced the Knesset parliament compound. Detritus from the explosion poured in through the shattered streets.

David leaped up and pulled her behind a fat pillar. Ellie struggled to her knees; they crunched over glass and soot. The windows on the opposite side of the lounge had also been blown out. Wind blew freely through the entire top floor.

Ellie was confused, then livid. *Not again.* Just as she had been getting ready to be pampered during a posh diplomatic flight home, she had been drugged, thrown into a laundry bin, and now they were all back in Jerusalem, which was being bombed to smithereens.

“We’ve...” Ellie gasped as David helped her to stand, “got to get out.”
The Israeli soldier ripped off his holographic disguise.

“We will, but Aleph is right. We must know what that was before we move.”

Around the bar area were scattered heaps under white Styrofoam-looking crud. It had fallen from the ceiling and was all over everything.

“Rabbi!” Ellie choked in the direction of the nearest large figure lying on the carpet. The older man was lying in a dusty heap under his burka. He coughed and said, “Mrs.—*chrrf*— Mrs. Stein, are you there?”

A tiny plaster-covered lump had tumbled to a stop by a couch. It groaned.

“As car bombs go”—two slipper-clad feet kicked out, and the elderly lady tried to stand—“that was a bad one.”

“There’s a couch behind you,” Ellie said. She helped Mrs. Stein be seated; she had a surprisingly strong grip.

David checked out the ceiling and the hallway to the elevators.

“The building is not on fire and is not falling down. Yet.”

No more explosions followed. Toxic-looking clouds of dust and debris undulated out from the blast site, which was about a mile away. All through the foglike haze, thousands of car alarms honked and shrieked indignation.

“Was that a nuke?” David asked. He had thrown off the rest of his disguise and held Miss Aleph’s handset tightly in both hands.

“My qualified opinion? No. I’m not seeing any double flashes from the hydrodynamic shock waves.”

“What do you mean shock waves? There was only one.”

“No, Dave. All across Israel, there have been at least one hundred explosions similar to the one which has destroyed the Knesset parliament buildings.”

One hundred! Ellie huddled over with the rabbi and his group by the filth-covered couch.

“I’m still analyzing the detonation profiles to determine nature and origin.”

Ellie wiped her face. Both her fingers and forehead started to bleed. It was like rubbing two sheets of sandpaper together. Of course, glass dust; it covered everything.

Something Ms. China had said in the British safe house came back to her. Could this have been the orbital weapons platform? Why strike now?

“Rods from God,” Ellie said absently. The dryness of her mouth made her gag.

“An interesting idea, Eleanor. The detonations have stopped. Total elapsed time just less than six minutes.”

“What did they hit?” David demanded. “Airfields, armored battalions, the Dimona reactors?”

“The strikes were aimed at command and control facilities: the Knesset, the HaKirya government complex in Tel Aviv, Shin Bet’s primary, secondary, and tertiary headquarters were also destroyed. A target in the Mediterranean Sea.

“Weather satellites recorded bolide meteor flashes in each instance.”

“A total decapitation strike.” David grabbed a pillar. His palm slid, leaving a wet red streak. “Against all the country’s institutions. Who would do that?”

“That would require more data. We won’t be getting any from Big Aleph. His server silos are all offline.”

Ellie detected a hint of satisfaction in Miss Aleph’s voice.

“Orbital bombardment would be consistent with what we’ve witnessed. Tungsten projectiles weighing between six to ten tons traveling at meteoric speed.”

“The impact in the Mediterranean,” David said sharply. “What was the target?”

“Unknown. Perhaps it was an errant projectile.”

“Whoever hit us doesn’t miss. Where was the *Magen*’s last known position?”

“Off the coast of France.”

The *Magen*, Ellie recalled, was the nuclear missile sub with David’s wife, Lia, on board.

**INS MAGEN
MEDITERRANEAN**

LIA

“Listen!” Anders yelled over the half dozen raised voices.

Everyone turned toward him.

“We have to face facts. We may be the last Israelis.”

“They can’t be all dead...”

“Are you sure? Three of our missiles dropping nine warheads could just about do it.”

“Not again!” Susskind said, visibly angry. “How the absolute ever-loving fuck does this always happen to us?”

“Let’s kill them,” an intense woman with a closely shaved head said.

“Let’s kill them all. Now.”

“Now hold on,” Anders started to say.

The woman cut him off. “We have to right this boat any way we can and surface. The missiles still have launch power.”

The woman pounded her fist on the dark inert panels hanging upside down over her head. “Don’t tell me you can’t arm the missiles without the captain. I know the protocols. After a verified decapitation strike on the government of Israel, Moses and one senior officer can launch.”

Susskind was on board. “We can have all the nukes in the air in thirty

minutes. Wipe them out: Damascus, Tehran, Mecca, Riyadh—”

“*Crewmen!*” Anders yelled, trying to collect himself. “We don’t even know who ‘they’ are.”

He ducked under the sensor mast and moved to the center of the inverted room, plastic crunching under his feet. After the devastating news from the mainland, even Lia could see shoring up crumbling morale on the crippled sub was a priority. It was more critical than ever that they all work together to survive.

“I don’t know the state of our homeland today. However, I do know its resilience. We waited millennia to have a home to call our own. In 1948, six hundred thousand Jews faced off against twenty times that number from seven Arab countries. We survived.

“More than that: we thrived. We thrived beyond anything Hertzl or the Hovevei Zion of the 1800s could have imagined. We will do so again by being smart, not rash. Once we know, once we know for certain, which enemy struck us, we’ll make the best possible choices for the future state of Israel. *Am Yisrael Chai*. The people of Israel live!”

Silence, broken only by the sizzling of torn electrical circuits and groaning of the *Magen*’s overstressed hull, followed the patriotic exhortation.

Lia did not want to dampen morale, but she had to be realistic. “Anders,” she said. “We’re in a tin can, floating upside down.”

Assuming David had somehow survived the bombing, her new worst fear was someone capturing the *Magen* and becoming an instant nuclear superpower.

“Bloody hell,” Susskind whined. “Joobae’s better off than we are.”

Lia imagined the Ethiopian Jew paddling his way toward Italy or France.

“Well, then, Lieutenant Baumann, maybe you could lend a hand.” Anders had a stiff upper lip that would not quit. “We’ve got some power back, but Moses won’t wake up.”

That *was* something she could do.

“I need someone to show me around the hardware.”

“Peretz, assist Baumann.”

A man with a bandaged head came forward. He was dangerously tall for assignment to a submarine, even one that was floating right side up. He kept ducking consoles and objects hanging from the ceiling.

“Where have you hidden Moses’s brain?”

He showed her.

The problem was relatively simple, if you had been interested in mechBrains since you were six years old.

“He’s trying to do a sectional reboot,” Lia said, studying the pulsating fiber-optic cables inside an access hatch.

The rhythmic cascade of colored lights made a lot more sense than what was happening in the outside world. Working on Moses kept her mind off what might have happened to David or whether her parents had made it to Greece.

“See here,” she said, pointing at a dark circuit junction. “Each time Moses tries, he can’t initialize his core brain. The superconductor’s fried.”

“He’s finished.”

“Not so fast, impetuous young one,” Lia said to Peretz, who was probably twenty years older than she was. “Once I figure out the interesting circuit mapping the Navy programmers have put on top of the elegant design we gave them four years ago...”

She needed tools. Her most important hacking equipment had been lost escaping from the ambush in France. All but one item. As soon as her fingers touched the black cat’s Egyptian eye, thoughts, very dark ones, formed in her mind. She hid them and walked back to Peretz. After she deleted a whole bunch of admin protocol subroutines from the boot menu, Moses woke up.

“He’ll be groggy, working at sub-quantum speeds, and a little grouchy.”

“He always was kind of surly.”

“Just be patient with him,” Lia said, closing the panel and pocketing the

locket, which was now connected wirelessly to Moses. “He’s emulating higher logic functions through autonomic nodes. The good news is, most of the *Magen*’s systems are offline. There’s plenty of processing power.”

“I would have figured that out,” Peretz said, saving face as the boat’s second-best programmer. “But not as quickly as you did. Thanks, er, ma’am.”

They collected their tools. Peretz checked his head bandage to see if it was leaking. “Say, I was in and out of it for a while. Is it true?”

“About Israel?”

“Is it... gone? What happened?”

“All the reports agree on a few things. About the same time the *Magen* was hit, explosions happened all over Israel. Big ones, dozens of kilotons each.”

“They said it wasn’t nukes. What else could do that?”

Lia shrugged.

“Shit.” Peretz gasped as the devastating reality sank in.

“The strikes were very accurate, the Kiryat, the Knesset, Dimona. All command and control, civilian and military.”

“What about the Iron and Titanium Dome defenses?” he asked. “They were supposed to shoot down anything.”

“Maybe they got some shots off.”

“Was it retaliation? Did we strike first? Did some lunatics in cabinet nuke Gaza?”

“I don’t know.” Speculating was useless, especially for them. “Mr. Peretz, please report to the commander what we’ve done. If he gives Moses one instruction at a time and waits for a reply, things should go fine.”

Lia fingered the Eye of Horus locket in her pocket. “I’m going to check the circuits in the missile bays to make sure none are crossed up.”

“Okay. Just don’t set one off by mistake.”

“That would make this day just perfect, wouldn’t it?”

...

A few hours later, Moses spoke over the submarine's intercom.

"All hands brace."

"All hands brace."

The *Magen*'s AI sounded like he had taken too much cough syrup. Lia thought it was a great improvement from when he had woken up. An hour ago, Moses could not communicate verbally at all. Everyone grabbed a solid object. Minutes crawled by. Nothing happened.

"Another false alarm?" Commander Anders asked her in his polite yet pointed way.

The stress of being inside the inert, crippled sub was beginning to wear even on the unflappable Brit.

"I, uh..." Lia was readying an upbeat retort when the whole sub shimmied. "Feel that?"

That shimmy turned into a rocking motion. Dozens of valves clicked and hissed. Like hamsters in a slow-turning steel tube, Lia and the others stumbled and jostled up the side bulkhead as the *Magen* righted herself.

Lia covered her head against falling debris. A pair of surgical scissors embedded themselves in her wrist. Not deeply. She pulled them out, elated.

"Told you," she said, pocketing the steel object for her next trip to the medical bay, which was once again located down from the bridge.

Applause and hurrahs echoed through the boat. It was short lived. They still had no main engine power, and every report they were receiving through their antenna buoy on the surface confirmed there was not much left of the Israel they had sailed from days before.

"The death toll isn't as bad as they thought," said Susskind. He was grudgingly following the commander's direction to stay positive.

"Not as bad?" Peretz said, exasperated. "In all our wars, there have been only a few thousand casualties, even the War of Independence. This is in the hundreds of thousands of Israelis dead, in minutes!"

"Are you counting fucking Arabush in that total?" a Shin Bet officer complained bitterly.

“Mr. Katz!” Anders snapped. “Apologies, ma’am. Notwithstanding certain government policies, I’ve respected and served with *all citizens*, Arab Christian, Muslim, and Druze. I expect everyone to do the same in the service of Israel.”

Katz was not through. “What fucking Israel?”

“The one you’re standing in,” Anders shot back. “If you don’t like it, you can take an escape pod off this boat and paddle wherever the current takes you.”

Anders nodded at Lia. “Baumann, we need your expertise aft. Mr. Petruk in engineering will take your instructions. Please work with him to get propulsion working.”

She did that. Lia also pretended the work was taking longer than it did. Secretly she collaborated with Moses on a small side project.

“How’s that coming?” Petruk, a dark-haired version of Eli, asked, poking his head up into the computer access bay.

“Great. If you have any luck charms, better use ’em now.” Lia hoped her laugh sounded less nervous than it felt to her.

“Baumann, report,” Anders’s voice squawked over the intercom.

“Initializing engines,” Lia replied.

With some groans and squeals of protest, which confined themselves to the hull, they were back under half diesel power. That put another urgent dilemma on the agenda.

“Sir, where to?” the helmsman asked.

Anders scowled at a screen that fed him images from news programs and social media posts.

“Haifa’s a disaster. Three of those explosions hit them. Looks like pictures of Nagasaki after the bomb.”

“Libya is down one sub. We could join them,” Susskind joked; he had evolved into the ship’s comedian.

Lia stared at the world map etched on a screen in blue and black. Needing

a country that would not sell them out to their enemies or steal their nukes made the globe seem awfully small.

“You’re from Britain. Gibraltar is close.”

“I don’t think so,” Anders said immediately. “By smuggling in and then losing control over a small atomic weapon, our Shin Bet friends have started a war with the EU.”

“Sorry,” Lia said sheepishly.

“While it’s obvious that one day Britain will be at war with the EU and their Russian allies,” Anders said, “the UK’s military is not anywhere strong enough yet. I have to assume my former countrymen would take us into custody and turn us over in exchange for trade concessions.

“Remember, during the British Mandate in the 1930s, English soldiers executed Jews as enthusiastically as they shot Arabs. There are fewer Jews in the UK today than when Charles Dickens was writing. The current Labour-Marxist home secretary was quoted as denouncing the ‘long tentacles of Israel’ interfering with British politics.”

“How about America?” Susskind said.

The navigator nodded. “We could ghost ride under the Sixth Fleet until we got to a proper port.”

Anders stared at the screen.

“I wouldn’t,” Lia said suddenly. “Israel and America have always had a tense relationship. We’ve set off a nuke in Gaza and attacked Europe with another one. All after decades of not admitting we have atomic weapons.”

“She’s right,” Susskind said. “Israel was only ever a playing piece; Truman did not decide to recognize us until after he was sure we were going to win the 1948 war. Now that the whole chessboard’s been blown to pieces, the Americans will put their own interests first.”

Lia remembered her father telling stories about trips overseas when he was in his teens. He seemed most enthused about his time in South America.

“How about Argentina?” Lia blurted out.

Not for the first time, they looked at her like she was a crazy Army stowaway.

“Maybe she’s onto something,” Peretz said. “Argentina’s got the third-largest Jewish population in the Western hemisphere, including the current president. Sephardic Jews have been living there since the sixteenth century in relative peace. Also, the South American Union hates the European Union. They’re always accusing each other of economic terrorism.”

“Don’t forget the Falklands’ war they had with the UK.”

Anders rubbed his sparsely stubbed upper lip, thinking.

“If it is down to us,” he said. “If, by some horrific stroke of fate, we are the last part of Israel’s power and sovereignty left... we have to be careful.”

“The South Americans have been blocked over and over from having nuclear weapons,” Peretz said. “Even though India, Pakistan, North Korea, and probably Saudi Arabia and Iran have them.”

“An alliance with the Argentinians and their allies would at least give us time,” Anders said. “We need to see what diplomatic traction we’ve got at the UN and financial support we can raise in America. Then we’ll go back and retake what’s ours. What’s always been ours!”

As shouts of affirmation rose, Lia felt coldness in the pit of her stomach. The old order of things had surely gotten thousands killed, and worst of all, it spawned the madness and despair that got Steph and Spencer murdered in a hideously cruel way.

Peretz, the oldest sea dog among them, peered at the map.

“That’s a long way on one engine,” he said.

Anders decided. “Then get the other one working. At worst it will give us time to watch and listen and the whole South Atlantic Ocean to maneuver.”

“What about fuel?” Lia asked, quite surprised to have her plan accepted.

A rakish smile crossed Anders’s face. “We’ll just have to ask some passing freighters for some of theirs. Politely, of course.”

“Underwater Jewish pirates.” Susskind chuckled. “If only Jules Verne had

thought of it.”

“Don’t raise the Jolly Roger just yet.” Anders did rough calculations of speed, distance, and depth. “First we’ll have to slip through the Straits of Gibraltar. When they look closely at the wreckage of the Libyan sub and find no radiation, they’ll be looking for us again.”

“Lots of luck to them!” Peretz boasted, stroking the side of the bulkhead. “We’ll whisper past them like a black cat in the—”

CLANK!

Before Lia could even think *what now?* Anders and the other bridge crew snapped their heads down over their stations. After a risking a few outgoing pings, their new problem became apparent.

“Big ship,” Susskind said from the sonar station. “Two hundred, no, three hundred meters long. Right on top of us.”

“How did we not notice?”

“Most systems are offline. I was figuring out how to navigate by a jury-rigged magnetometer.”

“Evade,” Anders said. “Any weapons available?”

“Nothing except the deck gun. I doubt it would do much more than annoy something the size of an aircraft carrier.”

“Dive.”

Lia felt the sub angle down, then it stopped as if it was a fish caught on a line.

“Sir, they may have a cable on us.”

“Full reverse, then forward. See if we can break free.”

Before the helmsman could obey, they heard a series of smaller *clank-clank-clank* sounds. It was as though someone with magnetic metal shoes were walking along the outer hull of the sub. They stopped when they got to the end of the *Magen*’s eighty-meter length. A grating *whirr* vibrated the interior. Objects, which had just been replaced on top of desks and consoles, fell off again.

The whirring stopped, replaced by an underwater whistling sound.

“Engine RPMs redlining,” Peretz said with urgency.

Anders sat down in his chair. He seemed drained of all energy and smiled weakly. “Shut it down,” he said, taking his headphones off and staring at the top of the conn. “They’ve sawed off our propeller.”

No one asked who “they” might be.

While everyone was occupied, Lia risked a glance into her pocket. The light on the Eye of Horus locket still glowed green. The red one in the center of the eye socket of the Egyptian talisman was dark.

Not yet. Soon, maybe.

The clomping metal feet came back from the stern. They stopped right above the conn. Something was there, just outside the hull.

Another sound started. It was not mechanical so much as rhythmic. The metal and surrounding water elongated the high notes and infinitely deepened the bass tones beneath the capacity of human ears to hear.

“What is that?”

“Whale song?”

Anders started to laugh. It was a hollow, mirthless sound. He put his feet up on his console.

“It is a song, all right. But not sung by whales. It’s David Bowie.”

Lia lurched on weakening legs over to the unoccupied ready room. The chair was broken. She sat on the rubber-covered floor. She resigned herself to being helpless inside a metal sub, being dragged along behind a huge ship, listening to old pop music.

...

The progress of the big surface ship towing the *Magen* was not as frenetic as Lia might have expected. It seemed almost leisurely. Their kidnappers seemed to have no fear of being intercepted.

The sub’s sensor buoy was lost, the tether nicked away by whoever had cut off their propeller. Only by closely watching the hastily rigged magnetometer

were they able to judge where they were headed and how fast.

“We’re headed west, toward Gibraltar,” Susskind said. “Speed about ten to fifteen knots.”

“Can’t you be more precise?”

“Magnetic fields are how whales and sharks navigate. I’m a little new to it. Maybe we should ask one of them for help.”

“Gibraltar’s the nearest British port.” The thought put Anders in a funk. “They’ll sell us out to the Euro Reich for sure. Bloody 1948 all over again, when they let the Arab League just have at the Jewish refugees who had managed to make it to the British Mandate after World War II.”

Lia was not so sure. She knew nothing about geopolitics and even less about naval combat, but she did know about technology. The abrupt and assured way their captors had latched on and crippled them, the macabre playfulness of piping in Davie Bowie songs to a vessel armed with eighteen ICBMs. It was all less like capturing a hostile vessel and more like omnipotent geeks playing a game.

“We’re turning near the Straits.”

“North, I expect,” said Anders.

“South,” Susskind said, checking the colored lines etching their way across his screen.

“What’s south?”

“Morocco?”

“And Ess Alüm,” Anders said thoughtfully.

“Huh?”

“It’s the dark reflection of Gibraltar to the south. It used to be a Portuguese and Spanish slaver colony. Later it was an independent city-state called Ceuta. Religious fanatics took over and renamed it. The world has forgotten about it.”

Lia barely recalled hearing of Ess Alüm before this. It did have one distinguishing feature according to Peretz.

“Before the free port cut off contact with the outside world, they built some of the largest shipyards anywhere in its bay. As large as anything in Korea or China.”

The songs playing from speakers attached to their hull looped and played from the start.

“Nothing to do but wait,” Anders said as he cajoled a flash boiler to heat up. “Tea?”

A Shin Bet soldier started to check his weapons.

“Stop that,” Lia said. Their hopeless tactical situation dawned on the stormtrooper, and he put his rifle down.

Minutes passed. They slowed, stopped, and felt their crippled sub being nudged sideways. Lia heard their steel leash slide off the hull.

“They must have submersible tugboats.”

The *Magen* was prodded into her next port of call. A sidelong tipping was followed by a dead stop. Then loud hammer blows, *kung-kung-kung*, rang through the boat.

Silence.

“There’s atmosphere outside the hatch. We are no longer submerged,” Anders said, straightening his uniform. “We can use the side dry-dock hatch.”

The crew rolled aside several panels of equipment. The *Magen*’s rectangular dry-dock hatch was manually unlatched and lowered with a long attenuated hiss. It folded down to provide a walk ramp.

Lia looked out and up. The clock said it was night. There were no stars in the sky. It took a moment for her eyes to focus.

Way above her was not the sky but a ceiling the size of a stadium, all shrouded in darkness except for a few arc lights round the perimeter. A concrete-and-steel dock stretched many meters fore and many meters aft of the *Magen*. Their ultimate weapon was literally out of its element and seemed puny.

Neither the hammer that had knocked on their hull nor the person wielding it was in sight. There was no telling yet who had brought them.

Before anyone could say anything like “hello” or “ahoy,” which would have sounded ridiculous in a space this size, Lia had something to say.

She spoke for herself, for her parents, for her great-grandfather the Bedouin who had fought with the Haganah, but most of all for Steph. Her friend, her great friend, who had always felt out of place. And when she finally had found a home for her special heart and soul, the evils brewed up in the land of her birth had snatched her back and devoured her last hopes.

“Commander Anders,” Lia said, reaching into her pocket, “and anyone out there watching. If we are the last Israelis, and we’re going to rebuild our homeland, it won’t be like before.”

“Baumann, is this the time?”

“You bet.” Lia pulled out Khóshekh’s pendant. “This is probably the only time I’ll have a nuclear button in my hands.”

“What... what are you saying?”

“If I press this, a five-hundred-kiloton warhead will explode.”

“You don’t have the arming codes,” Anders said.

Lia handed him a scrap of paper. “That’s your code, right?”

Anders stared at the paper. “You’ve gone mad,” he gasped.

“No, I think I’ve finally come to my senses,” she said into her handset.

“Moses, read back the passage we highlighted from the 1948 Declaration of Independence.”

The sub’s AI recited:

“...it will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants;

“it will be based on freedom, justice, and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel;

“it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race, or sex;

“it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education, and culture;

“it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions; and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.”

Ben-Gurion’s speech echoed through silent, colossally empty space.

Anders's attention was fixated on the Egyptian locket and the red button at its center. Their hosts had heard Lia's ultimatum. A slow, satiric clapping came from behind a pillar at the end of the dock. A figure was prodded into the light spilling out from the *Magen*'s hatchway.

"Joobae?"

It was him. He did not look very happy. Right behind him, another, taller figure appeared. This one wore a leather uniform and what looked like a strange gas mask. A gloved hand pushed Joobae forward. He muttered something in Amharic. Lia was now sure the figure behind him was a woman. She cuffed him across the back of his head.

"Speak English or be quiet. Go stand with your crewmates," the figure said in a voice that had a synthesized, metallic quality.

The woman let the light fall on her head. If she was hoping for a reaction ranging from shock to revulsion to disorientation, she got all of that from the *Magen* crew. Staring at them were two dinner-plate-sized compound eyes, an elongated snout hanging down over three conjoined orifices, out of which sprouted teeth.

Lia was sure it was a holographic Halloween mask.

"Put the detonator down, Lia Baumann. If you were going to use it, you would have pushed the button when our ship latched on to you."

"You're not getting our warheads and missiles," Anders said, eyeing the detonator.

"Phfft." The scoffing sound made her three mouths writhe and her elephant-style nose waggle. "If we wanted those, we could have drilled into your hull and gassed you before you knew what was happening."

Lia's finger hovered over the red button.

"We know what's happening now," she said. "So give me a reason not to vaporize this place."

The uncanny figure did not back down in the face of thermonuclear annihilation.

“Sorry, no hints.” Her huge compound bug eyes shimmered, reflecting the distant pinpoints of arc lights. “You’ll have to work that out yourselves.”

Anders stepped forward onto the dock. “At least tell us why you dragged us here.”

“Honestly, and look deeply into my eyes if you doubt me,” their host said, “I don’t know. What I can tell you is Israel’s Prime Minister Drach cheated my bosses on some deal. This got them upset. Very upset. That’s why your country got squashed like a bug against a windshield.”

The woman tilted her head the other way.

“Then,” she continued, “another member of the board was alarmed by the wanton destruction. That one likes Jewish culture, or Kabbalah, or astrology. Sometimes the translations are hard to understand.” She shrugged her leather-clad shoulders. “I was told to get you and your sub before someone blew you to hell.”

Lia still held the detonator locket. As far as rescues went, this was not very reassuring.

“We have wounded,” Anders said, his attention turning to practical matters. “We demand they receive proper medical attention.”

The woman’s mouths gyrated into three horrid grins in front and to both sides. She pointed her index finger straight up.

“You’ve come to the right place.”

Lia looked up; her eyes adjusted to the dim light. What had seemed to be just an arched steel roof a hundred meters above turned out to be a symbol, a snake aggressively embraced a long staff. An Asclepius rod and snake. It was the symbol of Worldwide Help International. Lia was not convinced and she had a nuke.

“How many of these directors are there?”

“Ah, let me think: probably five, but maybe six,” the bug-headed woman said impatiently.

“What do they want?”

“Whatever it is, they want it badly.” Their host impatiently jiggled her bulbous head, making the dragonfly eyes shimmer. “Last question. We have things to do.”

“Where are they?” Lia blurted.

The insect head pursed all three sets of lips on her three mouths and said slowly:

“Everywhere.”

Question time was over. The middle mouth smiled in a way both kindly and vicious. The short antenna quivered in the direction of Lia’s detonator.”

“Make up your mind. I don’t get paid by the hour.”

Not knowing exactly why, except for a faint hope that Anders meant what he had said and a faint hope that people could somehow find a way to be less terrible, Lia flipped open the locket and removed the battery.

When Lia looked up again, the woman was only a few feet away. She was taller than her or Anders. In a lithe motion, she spun behind them and put a hand on their shoulders.

The three of them walked down the ramp into the dark silent dry dock.

“Lia Baumann, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.”



108

12 DAYS LATER BBC STUDIOS, GERKHIN BUILDING LONDON

ELLIE

At her editor's insistence, Ellie had agreed to do the *Wake Up with Jeremy* morning show. One look at the hostile face of the associate producer made her wish she were back in Heathrow quarantine. At least the nurses and doctors on the other side of the containment glass had worn generally encouraging looks. Their optimism was justified. No cases of mutated Khóshekh smallpox had been recorded outside of Ramstein Air Base in Germany.

"We'll have to do something about that nose of yours," the scowling producer told her. He looked like a pound shop clone of the famous male lesbian Eddie Izzard.

"What's wrong with it?"

"It's not quite... there, is it?" he said, holding her chin with one hand and paging the makeup person with the other.

"I've been on telly before," Ellie advised the little control freak.

"I know, I saw. Just try not to stare at the camera looking like an online charity chugger while you're on my show," the fellow said. "This is BBC One. We have standards."

The makeup lady came, made her nose more “there,” and Ellie was waved on.

The shows she had been on before mostly involved willowy tall models who said little and never smiled. By contrast, her fellow panelists on Jeremy Greffer’s interview show were steaming mad enough to start throwing chairs. Maybe, Ellie thought, the host Jeremy Greffer should have bandages instead of a box of tissues on his desk.

The Eddie Izzard clone counted down to live broadcast, silently mouthing the last three numbers with his bright-red painted lips.

3...2...1.

Violence and bloodshed, the Holy Grails of live shows, could not legally be incited directly. However, producers always hoped. Ellie looked to the left and right of where they had sat her at the horseshoe-shaped discussion table. All the elements were certainly present.

“Please welcome our panel,” Greffer said through his teeth, which had to be dentures. “Topping this morning’s discussion: ‘The Holy Land, wither now?’”

That was all the prompt Konrad Zimmerman needed.

“It’s a shame on the world,” he said, clutching the cord of his pinned microphone as though someone were going to yank it away.

His desk placard said “Zionist Professor.” He was a very rotund man whose neck was barely contained by an Eton collar, which looked about to strangle him.

“It’s a shame on every human living today that Eretz Israel has been relegated to ‘nonmember observer state’ in the United Nations. No one, not even the USA, exercised a veto over this... this outrageous act of anti-Semitism. After half a million Israelis, including our heroic prime minister, died in the bombardment. That’s a good year’s work at Auschwitz concentration camp accomplished in only four days—”

“How dare you not count the six hundred thousand Arabs martyred in this

so-called Ninety-Six-Hour War,” yelled the fellow directly opposite Zimmerman. “The overwhelming share of the dead are Arabs!”

Khalif Masroor’s placard said “Islamic Professor.” He went on without a breath. “And do your figures give special mention to the eighty thousand Palestinian men, women, and children vaporized by the Zionist atomic bomb in Gaza?” Masroor’s hands writhed, turning his knuckles white. “Israel finally showed its true homicidal face to the world when its genocidal maniac Minister of Defense Boaz Baumann set off a Hiroshima-sized suicide bomb.”

The host, Greffer, was about to interject, when Rabbi Rachel knocked her desk lamp over.

“What will it take for you two to finally get mugged by reality?” the female rabbi said. She had a theatrically commanding voice that shocked the two quarreling men. “Over a million people have died; more are sick from radiation and some unknown disease. Does it matter what group they belonged to?”

The Islamic scholar straightened his hat and kept on, staring hatefully at the female cleric. “Israel was a racist and paranoid and delusional state. I’m glad it has been destroyed.”

The moderator Greffer finally intervened, pressing a button that muted everyone else’s mic.

“Noted, professors,” he said with a thin chuckle, leaning his big fat head toward the camera. “To update our viewers who may not have been watching the overnight sessions of the UN: the downgrade of Israel’s status to nonmember observer state is temporary and is exactly the same as Palestine currently enjoys in the UN Assembly.

“The Security Council has pledged to review the matter as soon as the applicant country can hold elections, allow nuclear weapons inspections, and rebuild the basic national infrastructure destroyed by the mysterious space bombardment.”

“Which no one seems ready to admit responsibility for.” Zimmerman

gasped. His collar was so tight, his face purpled. He was being choked by his own wardrobe.

Greffer turned to an older woman in the seat right next to Ellie. She had on a very simple blue dress, a string of moderately expensive pearls, and a European Union collar pin.

“Ms. Giscard, as a military pilot and an astronaut for the European Space Agency, what can you tell us about the so-called Rods from God?”

“Firstly,” Giscard said in an even French accent, “I do not believe any deity was involved. The known one hundred and seven impact craters on land could not have been caused by any one country’s weapons platform. NATO’s Cold War Project Thor and the Soviet Molniya kinetic bombardment system combined never had more than fifty warheads.”

A graphic appeared in the monitor facing the panel. It showed something resembling a pipe organ and a laser cannon shooting down onto the Earth.

“The kinetic bombardment systems were never officially activated and have been mothballed for thirty years. Of course, everyone knew they were there. I’ve passed by them while in orbit.”

“Will we ever learn more?”

“Several countries are launching probes over the next few weeks. US Space Force already piggybacked one into orbit two days ago. However, from what my contacts at ESA tell me, moments after the attack the weapons platforms which destroyed Israel broke orbit. They are headed straight for the Sun at one G acceleration. No one will catch them. Maybe there are forces at work that we will never fully understand.”

“Bringing us back down to Earth,” Jeremy said, turning his head, which honestly looked like a roast beef sporting a toupee, toward her. “Ms. Sato, you were one of the few journalists in the region during the entire conflict who lived to tell the tale. You actually met the villain Major David Baumann who blew up the iconic Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem.”

The monitor showed a very bad grainy picture of David standing on the

Western Wall, shooting people as the golden dome crumbled behind him.

“What can you tell us about the insidious evil that motivates fanatics—”

Rabbi Rachel cut off her response.

“It’s the patriarchy!” she cried. “It’s all their fault.”

“But Prime Minister Drach was a woman,” Greffer pointed out.

“Whose mind was poisoned well before she became bat mitzvah.” The female Jewish cleric’s voice was loud, and her American accent echoed through the studio like a bass war drum. “Archaeologists have proven the Jews of the First Temple worshipped Yaweh and his wife Asherah equally.

“Thousands of Asherah icons have been found in Jewish homes from before the Babylonian conquest. Someone had to be blamed for the fall of the First Temple. And wouldn’t you know it, the male rabbi class put it all on Asherah.

“By the time Extra returned to Jerusalem to read the Law to the People, true historical Jewish *duotheism* had been warped into masculine *monotheism*. We demand Asherah be restored to Judaism.”

“If we may come back to that possibly thorny theological topic,” Greffer said meekly. “First we’d like to hear what it was like in Jerusalem—”

Ellie did not remember standing or taking off her microphone and dropping it to the floor. She only knew she had to get out of there. Half blinded by studio lights, she got up and walked off the set.

The host was prepared for a walk-off.

“We’ll be back, or the rest of us will, after a short message from Topps’ Bliss, the only antidepressant chewing gum available without a prescription,” Greffer said.

As the camera’s tally light went from red to yellow, he added, loud enough so she could hear it walking away, “PMS meets PTSD. Maybe they should rethink the whole women in war zones thing.”

Ellie picked up her purse at the reception and made a dash for the lifts. She swiped her building ID and hit the floor for the *Citizen Juggernaut*. Even

inside the shiny metal box, she could not escape Greffer. His show was playing in the screen near the ceiling.

An inset picture showed a man with white flat-topped hair. He had round unblinking eyes, and at least three rows of medals hung from his chest. His nameplate said “Brig. Gen Graeme, (ret.) Royal Military College, Sandhurst.”

“The fascinating bit is that the decisive offensive military action occurred during the final six minutes of the war. While Israel thought it was fighting and winning on the battlefield, it was actually losing the conflict in political and world public opinion. Then, when the late prime minister turned her attention to fixing political issues related to the nuclear bombing in Gaza... Bam! Down came the kinetic projectiles.”

“Thank you, General. One bright young lady from my old school, Oxford,” Greffer said, letting the name of his alma mater hang in the air a moment, “has some ideas about the Holy Land’s future. Dr. Katja Hempstock, will you tell us about them?”

A blonde woman with the tightest rear-facing bun in the history of human hair spoke up.

“You’re really dealing with a social nightmare.” Dr. Hempstock’s eyes bulged as though her hair were squeezing her head. “I mean, Gaza has to be evacuated because of the radiation fallout. This Ninety-Six-Hour War made such a mess, in some places you cannot determine where the Jordanian border is, much less the Green Line of 1967. You’ve got Jewish refugees living in Druze areas, noncitizen Palestinians all mixed in with Israeli Arabs, who are Israeli citizens. It’s shambolic!”

The picture cut away to a live picture of Jerusalem. There was a huge white dome over the former sight of the Dome of the Rock. The ticker read:

“...seismologists from Worldwide Help have been authorized by the new Islamic Waqf to preserve the remains of the holy shrine and investigate new fissures opened in the ancient Foundation Stone...”

After getting a non-answer, Greffer read off his note cards.

“Some members of the Israeli-Palestinian ‘Land for All’ movement argue this is the time to realize the vision of two states and one homeland, allowing reconciliation between two people of the land, by creating a confederation of states of Israel and Palestine, which may include Jordan now that the monarchy has—”

“You want us to live with *them*?” Professor Zimmerman’s collar button finally popped clean off, allowing him to draw a breath. “These murderous, country-destroying Arabush—”

“By *the Prophet’s BEARD*! You did *not* just say that!” The imam rose up, his hat toppling behind him. His chair flew backward across the sound stage. “While we’re at it, why don’t we ask the British to take charge of the Mandate again?”

“Shouldn’t you be planting a bomb on London’s Underground?”

The camera jostled as the panelists rose to have a fistfight.

The camera rocked, and there was a crash as the horseshoe-shaped table overturned. Jeremy Greffer shrieked like a toddler with wet nappies. The lift door opened. Ellie ducked out.

A flying drone camera came at her like a bee to a rosebud. The building security system had one on every floor. The BBC producer must have told them to track her by her Gherkin ID badge.

“Gaar,” she said, swatting her hand out. As she did so, all the furious madness she’d experienced over the past weeks came back to her. So many people had died, had been shot, burned, vaporized right in front of her. She’d gotten out with only a few cuts and bruises and some burns on her wrists where Sarge Bryan had melted her plastic handcuffs.

This drone brought back the sharp memory of the first time she was sure she was going to be killed. At the Kurdish separatists camp. Her rescuers had used drones to lead the enemy away. Poor Mr. Borkin had stabbed the suicide bomber but then had been carried over the edge of the open pit mine himself. The view through the glass wall of the elevator made her head spin.

Somehow she was being dragged down into the shadowy pit with Borkin, twisting end over end until the fuse on the suicide belt went off and...

Her head hit something hard. It was the shiny metal handrail. As nauseated as she felt, and light-headed, she was still aware of the drone camera's cyclops eye watching her.

She was not going to allow Greffer and those prats to see her collapse into a sobbing mess. She was British and Japanese, one of her grandfathers had survived the Burma Railroad of Death. She wasn't going to give them the satisfaction.

Slowly, she pulled herself up. The remote cam flew after her for a few meters, hoping she'd say some cuss words or, even better for Greffer's ratings, commit suicide. When she did neither, and instead merely gave the drone an obscene gesture, it buzzed away morosely.

...

The St. Mary Axe building was nicknamed the Gherkin because the most socially respectable thing it resembled was a fat cucumber sat on its end. It was office space for many media companies, including the *Citizen Juggernaut*.

As she entered the newsroom, she braced herself for ridicule from her office chums for having walked off the BBC program. Then she remembered it was horrendously early in the morning.

Dawn, not dusk. She was still on Holy Land Apocalypse time. Neither editor Smitty nor any of her colleagues had arrived.

A mechBrain in the door scanned her and let her in. She heard a human sound down a corridor. It was only the human minder attending the cleaning bots that were rustling through trash bins and whirring away inside the lavatories.

Outside, the streets were quiet. The tinted curved glass of the Gherkin building flashed her mind back to the indescribable scene when the Knesset blew up. Her hands started shaking.

Out in the distance was Tower Bridge. Just out of sight was the London Eye. It was a big Ferris wheel, which everyone had to pretend looked cool and not childish. Mist shrouded Big Ben and parliament. Ellie forced herself not to imagine a man-made meteor smashing it all to pieces.

Everything looked different now. It took her a moment to notice something out of place on her desk. On top of work notes from the previous day, she found an unexpected piece of cardboard. Taped to it was a digital key, a winged “B” logo laser etched onto it.

“A Bentley volocopter?”

Who had left it? The maintenance man? One of the janitorial robots? She decided to go with it. There was only one place it could be parked.

She thought about sprinting back to the lift that was just closing, but her ankles advised otherwise. She had not broken or ruptured anything extremely vital during her Middle East adventures. The NHS took some X-rays and issued her a small bottle of ibuprofen, £2.50 co-pay.

Her hairstylist had to wear gloves because bits of glass kept showing up among her split ends.

The most serious potential damage she had not yet had the fortitude to get looked at. She was going to see a specialist later. Ellie checked in her bag. Inside a case was the Namiki, her retirement fund fountain pen. Something sounded loose and broken inside.

She arrived at the vaulted dome at the top of the Gherkin, which would be the business end of it if you imagined the building were a suppository, which everyone at some point did. The very tip of the roof had been extended into a flat portion to create a landing spot for flying cars.

After an escalator ride up the last twenty feet, she was on the windy platform, and there it was. At her approach, sensing the key in her hand, the volocopter’s gullwing door hissed open. Dark and sleek, it had that fresh-from-the-tannery leather smell. She slid the key into the console, and the warmup sequence began.

She barely felt liftoff. The weather over the city looked like a tossup between sunny with cloudy periods and vice versa. Ellie decided to root for sun.

About an hour into a quiet and uneventful flight northeast by way of Oxford, Ellie was rooting for a destination to pop over the horizon. Volocopters were basically drones that were big enough to carry people. Statistically they were supposed to be safer than ground cars, but this one was going quite fast.

A double-decker doughnut appeared on the horizon. She recognized it at once.

“Bloody GCHQ,” she said under her breath. The Government Communications Headquarters, center for cryptography and intelligence. “Uh-oh, what now.”

The flying Bentley set itself down on a pad on the inner ring of the roof. It was covered with grass and small oak trees. The second floor had been added because of opposition criticism that the old metal roof was not “eco-friendly” enough. GCHQ were spies and assassins, how eco-friendly could they be expected to be?

No one was there to greet her, take her into custody, or pressure her into another secret mission, which she firmly resolved to refuse... after she found out what it was.

A doorway slid open. She entered. Little green arrows on the walls and floor panels pointed her way.

“Mr. Sewart?” she said suspiciously. “If that’s you from the Foreign Office, I want to know what this is in reference to. Immediately. Do you hear me?”

There was no one around. Only a few gardening robots were trimming the grass. Then she had a more disconcerting thought.

“Ms. China?”

Ellie could only hear that distant hum that never ceased inside big

buildings. The green arrow formed by LED lights set in the walkway blinked, pointing her downward.

At the bottom of the stairwell was a door. At her approach, it unlatched and opened to an alcove with a seat for a guard. No guard. She walked into the next room; it was the size of a small theater. No sooner had she crossed the threshold than the door slid shut behind her, leaving her in complete darkness.

A very elderly, very insistent voice came at her from what she guessed was the front of the room.

“Is this thing on?” the venerable woman said. “Has she finally got there? There’s not much time left.”

Without preamble, an astonishingly wrinkled face ten feet wide appeared.

“Mrs. Stein?” Ellie had last seen her in Jerusalem at the temporary American embassy. She looked much more presentable without a layer of drywall covering her. “Is it safe to talk? Where are you? Is Rabbi Baumann with you?”

“Questions, questions.” The woman’s face retreated from her camera. “Listen for a moment, you might learn something.”

Behind Mrs. Stein, Ellie could see a six-sided plate. It was slowly floating in the air. A man’s hand grabbed it.

“Ms. Sato, you are speaking to the second-oldest thing currently orbiting the Earth, after the Moon.”

“You’re in space?”

“It’s not that exciting anymore,” Mrs. Stein said, waving her hand. “I was expecting rockets, boosters. What did I get? A long plane ride and a boring docking with the space station. I could have slept through it.”

They had said no place on Earth was safe for the Baumanns. They were publicly accused of conspiring to detonate the first atomic bomb used in war since Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Most nations had believed the lies spread by Prime Minister Drach before she was vaporized. They also thought the rabbi

was behind the Daggers cult. Ellie had to admit their hideout had one advantage: no one would believe it.

“When they launched the rocket to go after the Thor satellites, that wasn’t all they were carrying.”

“You and the rabbi...”

“We’re all that’s left of the real Israeli government. The war, Drach, and then the bombardment killed everyone else.”

Two men in black suits floated behind Mrs. Stein.

“Who’s the other fellow with Rabbi Baumann?”

“That’s Gabriel, the Sephardic chief rabbi.” Mrs. Stein smiled. “He’s not officially part of the government, but they’ve been together since yeshiva school. No sense separating them now.”

“How long can you stay up there?”

“A long time, they said. This is the main part of the ship that was supposed to take astronauts to Mars until funding ran out.” Mrs. Stein pulled her seat strap tighter to keep from floating up. “In a few days, they’ll get the habitat rotating and we’ll have artificial gravity.”

“You said there was no time. If there’s something for me to do...”

“There is. And wouldn’t you know it, the only time we can make this call is also the only time we can see Jerusalem from orbit. Otherwise the rabbi would give you his message himself. He’s determined to deliver the Seder blessing now. He made some changes by cutting out the ten plagues and putting in the story of Jacob wrestling just after The Four Sons. About time too, this is a much better.”

Behind Mrs. Stein, David’s father raised a glass and spoke in Hebrew. A live hologram of the scarred Old City flickered in the center of a console being used as a dinner table. A temporary white dome sat in place of the demolished golden one.

An auto-translation program detected Hebrew and scrolled English text.

“...And Jacob was left alone. And an angel wrestled with him until the

breaking of the day.

“When the angel saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob’s hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then the angel said, ‘Let me go, for the day has broken.’

“Jacob replied, ‘I will not let you go unless you bless me.’

“And the angel said to him, ‘What is your name?’

“He replied, ‘Jacob.’

“The angel said, ‘Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Yisrael, for you have striven with Elohim, and with men, and have prevailed.’”

A burst of static interrupted the service.

“You must be going out of range,” Ellie said hurriedly. “The message?”

“Oh... right...” Mrs. Stein fumbled with a data module, getting it into the socket just before the signal cut out.

...

The trip back to the city flashed by. Ellie’s head was reeling from what she had learned. In her pocket was a neatly folded message she had written down; it was from the rabbi for David.

The bulbous shape of the Gherkin and skeletal form of the newer, even more obscenely shaped, Tulip Building beside it came into view. Ellie doubted she could return to the newsroom. It was so exciting. This was *real* news, hard news that she had to get out somehow, as long as it could be done without endangering David Baumann or his father.

The Baumanns were being slandered as traitors, assassins, and war criminals who had set off a nuclear suicide bomb in Gaza. In reality, they were heroes who had preserved millions of lives and possibly civilization itself. How could she go back to the newsroom and discuss who or what might be mutilating cats in Croydon? The only way to tell the true story would be a book, a chronicle of the 96-Hour War. Smitty’s grandfather, a Cornishman more than a century old, was an agent of some kind; he would know a reputable publisher.

After landing on the Gherkin roof, Ellie was about to leave the key in the Bentley volocopter. The console chimed annoyingly.

What?

The navigation screen lit up with text.

Take the key.

The lease is paid for a year.

“Miss Aleph?”

Don’t expect anything for Hanukkah.

The screen went blank; Ellie pocketed the key. That settled it. Now there was no way she could sit at her desk. Headlines of possible stories flashed in her imagination:

“AIs living amongst us: What are their legal rights? Are they the ideal romantic matchmakers?”

Only one thing for it: more coffee. But first, a visit to a fountain pen shop. She walked past the Tomb of the Unknown Roman Girl and out of the rotund shadow of the Gherkin. Her next stop was right across from Lloyds Bank on Leadenhall Street. It was Ellie’s most favorite, most magical place in the whole shopping world. The fact that it was so close to where her paycheck was deposited meant her money only had to travel a short distance when new stock came in.

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Smartly dressed young assistants were laying out the window display. Though it was a few minutes before opening, Luc, the madcap manager, let her in. He wore a very high collar and his long gray ponytail flicked to the side as he held the glass door open.

“Ms. Sato, so wonderful to see you again.”

If Luc had seen the embarrassing runner she had done on *Wake Up with Jeremy*, he was polite enough not to mention it. All around, in little lit nooks

and inside counter cases, thousands of fountain pens gleamed. Barrels glowed, polished nibs twinkled. Here it was Christmas, Hanukkah, and New Year's every day.

"We have a new ink just in. Caran d'Ache Persimmon Sunrise. Just delightful."

"Sorry to say I'm in on much grimmer business." With great hesitation, she brought out her Namiki case.

"A repair," she said hopefully.

"What... what have you done now?" Luc said, his face ashen at the sight of the horrendously beaten-up pen case.

"I kept it in the hard case just as you recommended." It rattled as she set it down. "It's supposed to be crush proof."

"Not if it is run over by a tank, my dear girl," Luc said in rapid-fire Euro-accented English. "You realize this is not some plastic Bic or Sharpie? Your Namiki is a Yoshida-san maki-e original featuring his favorite subject: cats. It's priceless."

Almost. Someone did put a price on it. Poor Mr. Borkin. The first fatality of her much unexpected journey.

"I hope it's not completely bugged."

Luc looked inside.

"Hmph, looks like only the clip has come off," he said, holding the wounded item away from her destructive grasp. "We'll have to check for internal damage. At present, some people from the Society of Antiquaries are using our CT scanner to look at old Roman coins. I can get the Namiki into our fountain pen hospital this afternoon. Will you need a receipt?"

"Luc, if I can't trust you, who can I— Oh!"

A man using a single crutch, whose broad shoulders filled out his bomber jacket, had somehow silently stolen up behind her. She nearly bumped into him.

"Captain Atticus!"

“Ms. Sato, what a great surprise.”

“How did you ever find me?”

“As you pointed out in Ankara, I’m no ordinary soldier.”

“Indeed. Coincidences, they just keep coincidenting, don’t they?” Ellie said, thinking that was possibly the lamest thing anyone had ever said.

The American’s good humor seemed to fill the quiet shop as he flashed his signature smile. “I’m in town keeping Mr. Perdix company while the science types go over a few things.”

Luc had politely vanished into the back room and was studying the Namiki under a bulbous magnifying glass.

“How is everyone?”

Atticus brought her up to date. Sarge Bryan had gotten his eyes fixed.

“Upgraded to this wild shimmering gold color. Pretty soon Mr. Perdix says no one will want soldiers without augments.”

Ellie was sure there were bits of Atticus that were very worthwhile keeping.

“How is that odd fellow?”

“He’s been writing letters regularly to Ms. China. She claims each letter she sends has a poison on it to which the next letter has the only antidote.”

“That’s one way to keep a man interested in corresponding,” Ellie said. “What about Marwood? Did he ever get his tail back?”

“He did,” Atticus said. “It hasn’t turned out like the original one. It has no hair yet and looks like a long snake’s tongue with a fork on the end. He seems to enjoy it, and that’s what matters.”

That was brilliant news, but so many terrible things had happened.

“We can’t really say ‘All’s well,’ can we?”

“Can we ever? The Middle East, heck half the planet, is a mess,” Atticus said in a gruff yet reassuring way. “We did what we could, and we were lucky to have you along.”

They both looked at the brightly lit display cases.

“Say,” Ellie said. “You’re not looking for another pen to start the next world war, are you?”

“I think fountain pens are too fancy. With my clumsy hands, all that ink filling, it’d be a mess.”

“Let’s see your writing hand.”

Ellie took his big warm hand and stretched it out as though she were going to do a palm reading.

“Just as I thought. You could definitely master an oversized instrument. With practice, of course.”

“That’s the only way,” Atticus agreed in a bemused tone.

“First we’ll have to have a serious talk about length, girth, and most important of all: wetness.”

Atticus scratched the back of his neck. “That sounds a might bit involved and all. Look, I’m in town for a few more days, and right now I could really use a coffee.”

“What was I thinking?” Ellie said, finally thoroughly cheered for some reason. “Fountain pens can wait.”

She grabbed her jacket off a chair.

“Did you know they were invented in the early 1800s? Of course, quills and brushes go back thousands of years...”

Ellie held the door open for him as he exited on his crutch.

“We must get you off your feet. There’s Caffè Nero right across. Have you ever had a Red Eye espresso?”

EPILOGUE



**IN THE SHADOW OF THE VOLCANO
TAUNG KALAT BUDDHIST MONASTERY
MYANMAR**

Elder monk R Saha heard muttering from the small haunted cell and he was immediately offended. It was not the right kind of muttering which was coming from the place where the big foreigner slept. The language being spoken was wrong and was doubtlessly offending the local nat spirits.

In the correct language, he grumbled to himself. “Being a hermit used to mean something.”

The Buddhist monk eased his bent legs down the stone steps.

“There was peace. There was quiet.”

He pulled his clean pink robe away from his feet. Pausing at an alcove, he twisted the bent reflector of the oil lamp to show the ground. He did not want to slip on a centipede.

“Now we have tourists and great big foreigners to bake for them. No wonder the spirits are angry.”

R Saha put his gnarled hand on the wall of living stone as much to maintain his balance as to judge the mood of the pillar of volcanic rock from which the entire monastery had been carved.

“No wonder the great mountain rumbles.”

Reaching the lowest level, he rapped his cane on a timeworn wooden door.

“Sleeping, or waking, or even thinking loudly, the suborned novice will speak only in the blessed Pāli language, or the suborned novice will be invited to depart.”

The door of the cell creaked open. A very black cat with very long ears crept out. His name was Kāla. He stared at the monk with amber yellow eyes.

“Kāla has more chance of reaching enlightenment than you ever will.

Unable to speak, he properly remains silent.”

“Apologies, Reverend Elder,” the strong but clumsy foreign novice said. He spoke Pāli, or tried to. He was improving each day, but the monk feared this one’s clumsy words in the blessed language would never sound any more pleasing than the braying of water buffalo. “I must have been talking in my sleep, Revered Elder.”

“No excuse,” R Saha snapped. He pushed the door open and rapped his stick on the man’s shoulder to make certain he had the sleepy giant’s attention. “Sleeping or waking, the nat spirits hear your words and know your thoughts. Only Pāli pleases them.”

“Again, deep apologies, Revered Elder.”

The man’s body injuries were healing well. R Saha thought of other, more demanding chores he could be put to.

“Now wash. Then prepare the kitchen. It is the full moon of Nadaw. Pilgrims will come. Even outlander barbarians will visit us and gobble down your ridiculous baked buns.” Saha turned away. “I am going to mediate. Do not make noise.”

“I will try to be as silent as Kāla, Revered Elder.”

R Saha’s mood lifted. He secretly liked eating the foreigner’s strange baked foods.

“Oh, and there is something for you. It has come through the water pipe. When you open it, please be off the holy pedestal hill.”

“Then it must be a message, one not written in the sacred language.”

“The suborned novice is clever.” The smile vanished from R Saha’s wrinkles. “You will find there are two roads. Along one, you may gather cleverness; the other leads to enlightenment. They go in opposite directions.”

...

Woken hours before dawn, the novice made good use of his time. He stretched his aching, healing body and prepped his kitchen kit.

Through the small aperture in the volcanic rock wall of the cell came the

sounds: horns and cymbals. He had recently come to understand how this noise guarded the quiet solitude of the monastery.

The foreigner slipped sideways through narrow passages. Every few steps, he was forced to duck under lintels. The fortresslike monastery had not been built for tall and awkward men. Arriving in the kitchen, he started in on his share of the general prep work. After that was done, he sifted flour for his own baking. The other novice monks gave him sidelong glances, smiled, and let him be.

He had appeared in the village a few months ago. He had bargained with the monastery's business manager who lived at the base of the hill. The monastery's manager was the current nat kadaws, a transgender woman who was lord consort to the spirit world. On special occasions, she went into a trance and was possessed by one or another nat spirit. Fortunately, as well as being able to communicate with the native deities, the nat kadaws could speak English.

He had only scarce recollection of his journey to Taung Kalat. Dank holds of ships. Overcrowded trains. Tour buses creaking on rusty springs tottering along the edges of mountain roads.

The moment he saw this place in the morning mist, all the sights and sounds and smells and tastes and hurts of his journey had faded. This was his destination. He knew. He had seen it—the hill, the volcano, and the golden temple rising on its pillar.

Upon being introduced to the Revered Elder, R Saha immediately told him to be gone. The monastery had enough staff for all the work that needed doing. They had a long list of monk applicants from good families who had been brought up speaking the holy language, Pāli.

Through the translator, R Saha told him that all up and down the hill were hundreds of monkeys who guarded the holy 777 steps to the top. Each one of them was more useful than he could ever be.

He was large. He would eat as much as two normal men and would need to

be taught everything. What use could he be at the Taung Kalat temple? The compassionate thing to do, it was decided, was to send him away. The monks gave him a big green leaf containing food for a few days and pointed him to the next village.

He remained.

A few days later, he got his big ungainly hands on some flour, eggs, and butter. He showed them his one poor talent. That afternoon, he handed out samples of his baked “hot cross” buns to tourists. Having proved his point, he promptly collapsed in the humid heat of the afternoon.

The temple cooks made steamed buns. These were not popular with Westerners who complained they were too doughy. The strange man’s new cakes were cheap to make and raked in hard currency like no other product they had tried. R Saha, sworn to total poverty, was in need of cash.

The national government had kept the monastery free from tax. However, the local chieftain insisted on being paid rent for the land at the foot of the volcanic precipice upon which the monastery perched. The chieftain was greedy. He would not accept prayer wheels in his honor. He demanded cash and threatened if he was not paid he would burn down all the illegal dwellings.

Around the base of the 777 steps leading up to the Taung Kalat temple, a shantytown of shelters had grown up. The rough structures housed refugees. Among them was the big injured foreigner. The monks continued to feed him, tended to his wounds, and considered his business idea.

The stranger had a companion, a pure black cat. As the nat kadaws and the community chief were deciding what to recommend to the elder monk, the cat returned from an afternoon walk. He looked like a miniature black panther and dragged in a dead rat nearly half his size. He laid it on the doorstep. It was an omen.

“Your companion is useful enough to have earned a name in Pāli,” the nat kadaws said. “R Saha will therefore reconsider your application.”

Despite his woeful ignorance and large appetite, he was admitted to Taung Kalat on a temporary basis. His compensation was food after everyone had eaten and lodging in a small cell no one else wanted because it was haunted by a rather unpleasant nat spirit, one that had met an unspeakably violent “green death” in that very place. He ate well and slept soundly.

Besides food for himself and his avid mousing companion, he asked only one thing. R Saha arranged for a local artist to hand tap a spired crown tattoo, which granted good fortune and protection in battle, onto his arm. The old goat of an artist asked for extra money because normally he would use his sharpened metal rods to place this symbol on the top of the head, where it was meant to go. The foreigner insisted he wanted to cover up an old tattoo on his arm, a truly ugly design reading X0X.

After a few weeks, while making no more bothersome requests, working hard in the kitchens, R Saha witnessed the monastery’s wonderful food and magnificent spiritual energies caused the foreigner to make a speedy recovery from his injuries. Soon he could make it up and down all 777 steps from the monastery to the village without resting. In a month, he was able to run halfway to Pòpá Tàun, the active volcano that loomed over everything.

...

By midmorning on the day R Saha roused him, the foreigner’s baked goods were cooling. He looked to the kitchen chief. The wiry bald monk told him with body language alone that, for the moment, there was no more work to be done. Before the older man could change his mind, or R Saha could order him up on the roof to polish the golden spires again, the novice ducked out to the courtyard. He turned at the door, put his fingers lightly together, and bowed.

Amitabha.

The older monk acknowledged his departure with a small nod, like one that might be made by a reed in a soft warm wind.

In the middle of the courtyard were two pools fed by a spring. Hot water

warmed by the magma came out of the left spigot, cool water came out from the right. Apart from rain, this was the source of all their water. The flow also carried messages.

The nat kadaws in the village could insert a watertight bamboo tube into the volcanic pipe at the base of the hill. Faster than one could climb 777 steps, it would rise on the continuous torrent and launch out into the courtyard pool. The novice saw such a bamboo tube sitting on a stone ledge. He grabbed it and ran.

As he descended the long stairway, a juvenile monkey and his playmates scampered down with him. After a while, they jumped off the polished brass handrails, tittered, looked back at him, and then ducked out through a window in the roof covering the stairs.

Reaching the base of the monastery's hill, he held the bamboo container like a baton in a relay race. He ran along the small jungle path that led to the volcano's rim. He dared not even think about what might be inside until he was almost all the way up the side of Pòpá Tàun.

The caldera was half a mile wide and nearly a mile deep. Night and day, it was venting steam and superheated gases. He looked around. This should be far enough away so as not to offend the spirits.

He popped open the end of the tube. Inside was an envelope smudged with several layers of stains. This message had followed the breadcrumb trails he had left during his journey. He was surprised it was sent and even more astonished that it got to him.

Parchment of snow-white synthetic vellum was curled in a tight roll. He unfurled it. The handwriting was bold and clear. The letters were cursively shaped by a broad-nibbed fountain pen using a dramatically shaded purple ink. The parchment smelled faintly of lavender flowers. Only one woman he knew could have written them. The message could only have come from his father:

Tikkun olam

Next year in Jerusalem
Shalom

Tikkun olam was the biblical phrase urging an individual to try to heal what is wrong in the world. The reference to Jerusalem was often said at the end of the Passover seder. The words blazed in the novice's mind as the sulfur gases rising from the volcano burned his nose and throat. The novice acknowledged he had killed unrighteously, he had mistrusted those closest to him, and been a cause of everything he had wanted to prevent.

He faced west and said a silent prayer in a language that was forbidden at the temple. He asked forgiveness from all those he had harmed by word, or deed, or inaction. Then he put the parchment back into the tube and hurled it into the volcano.

The bamboo container tumbled through hot clouds of sulfuric gases rising from the Earth's core. It struck the glowing magma dome, bounced, landed, smoldered, then burst into flame.

The smoke from the bamboo container, the paper, and the message on it rose up to the rim of the caldera that bounded the kingdom of tormented liquid stone. The ridge was empty. The figure of Taung Kalat monastery's suborned novice was gone. He was descending the winding path down the side of the volcano, back into the mists and shadows of the valley, back to the place of people and their nat spirits.

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APOCALYPSE ISRAEL WIKI

Arab Citizens of Israel: Most Arabs who remained physically within the 1948 borders of Israel were given citizenship but were subjected to martial law until 1966. They make up about 21% of the Israeli population. 80% of them are Sunni Muslims, 9% are Druze, and another 9% Christians.

Arab residents in unannexed portions of Judea and Samaria (West Bank) are not citizens of Israel and neither are any residents of Gaza.

Adaptive Execution Office (AEO): A DARPA division. It focuses on military technology transition, assessment, and adaptive systems.

Aliyah: Literally “moving up,” the Hebrew word for immigration to Israel under the Law of Return. It applies only to ethnic Jews as defined by the government and does not guarantee recognition as a Jew by the religious Orthodoxy headed by the country’s two chief rabbis.

Chief Rabbinate Council: The supreme rabbinic and spiritual authority for Judaism in Israel. There are two chief rabbis—one for the Ashkenazi tradition and one for the Sephardic tradition. In recent years, to satisfy Orthodox political parties, one or the other chief rabbi sits in Israel’s cabinet as Religious Services Minister.

Daggers of Ehud: [FRENET rumor] An extremist faction in Israel. Generally thought to be a paramilitary organization, though no specific acts of violence or terror have been conclusively attributed to it. Some anonymous sources link it to groups that want to forcibly occupy the Temple Mount in

Jerusalem and destroy all Islamic holy sites there in order to build the Third Temple.

The only individual ever to claim membership was a mentally disturbed Orthodox man from Acre. Identified by Shin Bet only as Avi G., he claimed the Daggers were offshoots of the violent extremist Kach (Hebrew: כ"ך) party, a Jewish group banned as a terrorist organization. Records show Avi G. was committed to Sha'ar Menashe Mental Health Center for the criminally insane. His current whereabouts are unknown.

In scripture (Judges 3:12–30), Ehud was sent to the Moabite King Eglon on the pretext of delivering the Israelites' annual tribute. Ehud said, "I have a message for you from G-d." He drew his dagger and stabbed the king in his abdomen. The dagger disappeared into the wound.

Directorate of Military Intelligence: The military intelligence body of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF).

Grey Wolves (Turkish: Bozkurtlar): A Turkish ultranationalist organization. It is estimated there are 2,000 Grey Wolves organizations, 300,000 registered members, and several million active sympathizers.

mechBrain: A machine mind that is more than an automation but less than an AI. Often used derisively.

Mossad: Israel's external Security Intelligence agency.

New Physics Weapons: New physical principles weapons are a wide range of weapons or systems created using emerging technologies such as electromagnetic wave, psychophysical, and genetic weapons.

see also:

A.N. Terschenko; I.V. Ovcharenko; O.D. Yalnickii; V.N. Kuprii. “Main Directions of Development of Weapons on New Physical Principles, Science and Technology of the Ukrainian Air Force.” Ivan Kozhedub Kharkiv National Air Force University (in Ukrainian).

Orthodox Judaism: A collective term for the traditionalist branches of contemporary Judaism. There is no centralized denomination. It includes ultra-Orthodox or “Haredi” (a system which is more conservative and reclusive) and Modern Orthodox Judaism.

Palestinian National Authority: An Arab self-governing body in the West Bank (Judea and Samaria).

Project Thor: A weapons system that launches telephone-pole-sized kinetic projectiles made from tungsten. Jerry Pournelle originated the concept while working in operations research at Boeing in the 1950s before becoming a science fiction writer.

Pure fusion weapon: A hypothetical miniature hydrogen bomb. For many years, nuclear weapon designers have researched how to ignite a fusion reaction. Pure fusion weapons the size of a golf ball could explode with the force of many tons of TNT. Experiments have been conducted to determine whether a **Voitenko compressor** shaped charge could set off a small fusion reaction.

Red Dawn (Hebrew: שחר אדום, Shachar Adom): The highest-level alert of Israel’s Home Front Command.

Shin Bet: Israel’s internal security agency. Its motto is “Magen veLo year’e” מגן ולא יראה “The Unseen Shield.”

Space Junk: Over one million objects orbit Earth. These are satellites, pieces

of satellites, and stellar debris. Some objects have been observed moving under their own power.

Temple Mount (Hebrew: הַר הַבַּיִת, Har HaBáyit, “Mount of the House [of G-d],” also called Noble Sanctuary by Muslims, Arabic: الحرم الشريف, al-Ḥaram al-Šarīf. The Temple is one of the most ancient holy sites in the world, with a history stretching back at least five thousand years.

Political strife has made archaeological exploration of the Mount impossible. In 1996, a tunnel dug by Jewish scientists exploring under the Western Wall caused riots and bloodshed. In 2000, a visit by Jewish politician Ariel Sharon to the Mount started the Al-Aqsa Intifada which lasted four years and claimed thousands of lives across Israel. No one knows what lies under the Temple Mount.

Waqf: The Muslim religious trust that administers the Temple Mount.

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Edition: 1.0.1

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Editing: Taryn “Lois Lane” Lawson

Cover: James “Tiberius” Egan of Bookfly Design

Formatting: 52 Novels LLC

eISBN10: 1-910890-11-1 (eISBN13: 978-1-910890-11-0)